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THE REPENTANCE OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

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THE REPENTANCE OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

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THE REPENTANCE OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

By

STEPHEN GWYNN

LONDON
JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD
1899

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THE NEW YORK
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Qui vit sans folie n'est pas si
sage qu'il croit

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TO THE WISDOM OF

MY LADY INDISCRETION

Anderson 10 Dec. 1923

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THE REPENTANCE OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

CHAPTER I

AS one travels northward through the centre of England, the aspect of railway stations changes curiously. Every trace of the holiday-maker disappears; one sees no more passengers entering or getting out with golf-clubs, gun-cases, fishing-rods, or the other instruments of sport. Commercial travellers, with their severely business-like costume and severely practical luggage, are attended to by half-hearted porters, unexpectant of windfalls. There is no sign of greeting or leave-taking; the artisan preponderates, and women are seldom to be seen.

It was on such a platform, in a little town of the Midlands, that Gerald North waited. As the train pulled up, he had no difficulty in discovering the gentleman he had been sent to welcome, when a knickerbocker costume with tan boots of scarcely

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subdued newness descended from a first-class carriage. The rest of the attire—blue shirt and tie of a soft well-chosen red—completed his assurance, and he walked up to the newcomer.

"Mr de Cerjat, I think?"

"Certainly. And you, I presume, are Mr North."

They shook hands.

"The porter will take your bag out to the trap," said Gerald. "Mr Eyrton desires me to make all manner of excuses, but they have three or four people staying in the house, and he must put you up at the hotel."

De Cerjat expressed a civil acquiescence. They got into the trap, and as they were driving to the hotel, North continued:

"I would suggest that we should get some lunch first, and after that we could go over the works and see things. Of course you'll dine up at the Eyrtons; but Mrs Eyrton has some people coming to a sort of afternoon function, and if you can face that, she will be delighted."

"It will be a pleasure."

"Very well, then, the trap will take on your things, and you can dress up there."

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"Tell me something about your chief," said de Cerjat, as they sat down to lunch. "In my ignorance I am at a loss. I hear the names of Dobson and Crawshaw, but the firm seems to consist of Mr Eyrton. Are the other gentlemen mythical—the saints of the establishment—and he the acting vicar?"

Gerald laughed.

"Oh, Dobson and Crawshaw exist all right; Crawshaw is getting elderly and a little shaky, but Dobson represents the second generation. His father was the original head of the firm—big weavers. Eyrton, you know, is quite another personage. He was an Oxford man—rather a distinguished Oxford man at that. He had some money, too, and a lot of ambitions, I should say. So he knocked about the world for a few years and picked up things, and finally he struck a man with a new patent process for working this ramie fibre. Everybody knew about the fibre, but no one had managed to work it on a commercial scale, and lots of people had dropped money over it, so no one would look at the patent. However, Eyrton went into the matter, and decided it was all right. Then he came up here and looked about

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for a firm of weavers who would go in with him. He's a good man to talk, and finally he convinced these old chaps that he was on the right scent, and then you see he had £20,000 to back his opinion with. So he practically planked the lot on ramie, and it turned out all right."

"Do you mean to say, he put every penny into a sort of gamble?" asked de Cerjat.

"Well, it wasn't quite so risky as all that. You see he married before he made the speculation, and Mrs Eyrton has a pretty fair income in her own right, I believe."

"Indeed. She was the daughter of some of these worthy weavers, I suppose."

Gerald laughed. "Not quite," he said; "trade isn't much in Mrs Eyrton's line of country. Her father was an Indian civilian, I believe; anyhow, she was the only child, and all the money he had went to her when she was a child, so it was a good bit by the time she came of age."

"Ah! And I infer from your tone that she has other attractions besides the pretty fair income. However, we shall see. I begin to understand. Mr Eyrton—brains, ambitions, wants to make money—what then? Parliament?"

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"I daresay he wouldn't mind," said Gerald.

"Messrs Dobson and Crawshaw, manufacturers—old style—guided by progressive partner. Progressive partner directed in matters relating to art by his private secretary—am I to presume?"

"And by Mrs Eyrton," added Gerald.

"Mrs Eyrton—why, what does she know about art? Am I to flatter myself that the name of de Cerjat is a household word in Stonedale?"

"Mrs Eyrton is not Stonedale," said Gerald. "As a matter of fact she is rather posted in these matters. She put in a few months art studenting in Paris. That was where Eyrton met her."

"Heavens above us! Do you tell me that a woman with a Parisian experience and an income worth mentioning, lets her husband plunge her in this desolation?" He looked out of the window at the bare little town, certainly unattractive enough.

"It isn't all so bad as this," said Gerald, "but you will see for yourself later on. Now, if you've finished, we might be going round to the works, and I'll show you the way these patterns have to be put on the loom."

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CHAPTER II

MRS EYRTON was sitting on the terrace in front of Foxholme, and talking to Lady Simeon, wife of the sitting member for Stonedale, when the robust person of Mrs Crawshaw deposited itself with a flop and ensuing creak into the basket-chair beside her.

"Mrs Eyrton, you know that girl that went from you to Mrs Ullathorn with a six-months' character?"

"I know," said Mrs Eyrton.

"Well, she's come to me for a place of parlour-maid. Do you really think now —— Good gracious!" she said, "who is this Mr North has got with him?"

Mrs Eyrton smiled a smile, partly of relief, partly of amusement. It was no light surprise that could check Mrs Crawshaw in the discussion of domestic economy.

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"That must be Mr de Cerjat, the artist, who has come down to make the new designs which are going to glorify ramie stuffs at the Belgian Exhibition."

"Good gracious!" said Mrs Crawshaw, "look at his hair; and why does he carry his hat in his hand?"

"To let you see the contours of his head, I imagine, Mrs Crawshaw."

Mrs Crawshaw gasped.

"And knickerbockers," she said, "and a blue shirt. It surely isn't manners in London to wear knickerbockers to a garden-party?"

"You never can tell, Mrs Crawshaw. It used not to be; but it is such ages since I've been there. But I must go and speak to him; the poor man might be shy, you know."

Mrs Eyrton crossed the grass with an alacrity of movement that spoke of escape. Mrs Crawshaw, she knew, would not easily disengage herself from the embraces of that deep-recessed wickerwork. De Cerjat made an impressive bow.

"Well, Mr de Cerjat," she said, when he was duly provided with tea, "have you discovered great artistic possibilities in ramie stuff?"

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"I think I know enough about ramie, Mrs Eyrton, to say that you do not wear it."

"No, indeed. We live on ramie, and we talk ramie, and we think ramie, but I do strike at wearing ramie—at least," she added, "till you make something really beautiful with it."

"Oh!" said de Cerjat, "if you would only go to the Exhibition in a dress of my designing."

"The very latest thing in posters I should be, should I not? Shall I be a Chéret, Mr de Cerjat, or a Lautrec, or a Beardsley? Oh, please, not a Beardsley."

De Cerjat laughed.

"I did not expect to find Parisian posters in Stonedale."

"Ah, you don't allow for the diffusion of culture. I assure you we have University extension lectures here. There was a serious young man who came down and talked to us about the decadents. He had such high, noble ideals himself. Besides, look there—is not that Parisian?"

A lady was bearing down upon them with a determined air; her dress volleyed discords at them, and an aggressive hat, with a whole flora

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and fauna disposed about the crown of it, sat incongruously over her stolid countenance.

De Cerjat looked critically.

"Paris made it," he said, "for export; but, anyhow, Paris did not make her. Who is she?"

"Mrs Dobson, the wife of our senior partner, a lady who has a passion for art. Let me introduce you."

"Ah, Mr de Cerjat," said Mrs Dobson, bending attentive eyes on the artist, and suggesting inevitably a note-book and pencil somewhere concealed about her person, "how *you* must enjoy this lovely view!"

De Cerjat looked over the beautiful dale, with its grassy sides, swift river, and broken clusters of woods.

"It is certainly very pretty, but a trifle obvious, don't you think? We have got so far beyond prettiness now."

"Yes, of course," assented Mrs Dobson eagerly. "You like something wilder and grander—Swiss mountains. I always have so longed to paint a sunrise from the Rigi."

"Swiss mountains!" said de Cerjat, raising contemptuous eyebrows; "funicular railways. Crude greens and blues——"

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"Wasn't there once a person called Turner?" said Mrs Eyrton, coming to the rescue with a smile.

"Turner," said Mr de Cerjat. "Ah, yes. But that was a long while ago."

"And pray, Mr de Cerjat," said Mrs Dobson rather sternly, "what *is* the sort of landscape that you admire?"

"Ah, so many. But to take an example: if you must have something green—say Hyde Park, looking towards the Marble Arch at twilight on a winter afternoon, when the trees and houses are all purple in a haze, and the long lines of gas-lights make splotches of golden yellow; you see the gold against colour then—just three or four tones in your picture. But, it is really far more beautiful if you drive down Regent Street on a wet night, with the lights in the streets, and the lights in the shops, and the reflections in the puddles; then you should have red lamps out across the road where they are mending it; and it all goes into a wild whirl of dancing, splashing lights, that make beautiful patterns over the whole field of what you see."

Mrs Dobson's disapproving look gradually

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relaxed during this tirade; she was obviously clutching her mental pencil—here was one more gospel of art to go down in her note-book alongside of the latest Ruskinian lecture.

"How delightful it must be to have the eye of an artist," she said; "I should never have thought of those things. I do hope, Mr de Cerjat, you will make time to come and see us. My husband is a great picture-fancier, and he really has some splendid Leaders."

"Leader!" said de Cerjat. "Who is Leader?"

Mrs Dobson looked incredulous and surprised. "Leader! Why, the Academician — the great landscape painter."

"Ah!" said de Cerjat, "that accounts for it. Of course I should not know him."

Mrs Eyrton laughed outright.

"Really, Mr de Cerjat, you are too bad. Mrs Dobson, some day Mr de Cerjat will be in the Academy himself, and all the rising artists will despise him. Besides, you know," she said, moving to de Cerjat, "you exhibit there now."

"Oh," said Mrs Dobson, relieved at the change of subject, "is there a picture of yours there? I shall look forward so much to seeing it. You

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know, Mr de Cerjat, I make it a point never to miss an Academy."

"No more," said de Cerjat, gravely, "than you would omit to go to church once at least every Sunday."

"Exactly; that is just what I think. It is a duty to one's soul—to one's higher, holier nature. I shall always think of that," she concluded, "in future. Good-bye, Mrs Eyrton; I have enjoyed myself so much. Do come and see us, if you can, Mr de Cerjat."

De Cerjat stretched himself out in his arm-chair.

"Are many of your friends so much interested in art, Mrs Eyrton? Do show me some more of them."

"Certainly not, Mr de Cerjat. You were not a bit nice to Mrs Dobson. I shall not introduce you to any one else."

"Very well," he said. "I may smoke? Then, will you tell me how you contrive to exist here?"

"It is a very healthy neighbourhood, and, now that you are not bound to *épater* Mrs Dobson, you may admit that it is rather a pretty place."

"Scenery is all very well, and so is health; but the calm, Wordsworthian existence is not—well,

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not what I should pine for if I were—let me say, if I were you."

"I hate Wordsworth," she assented.

"Then for human society you have—Mrs Dobson——"

"And Mrs Crawshaw—that lady in purple silk. She wants to know if it is the right thing in London to wear knickerbockers at garden parties?"

"Well, well, I should prefer that to Mrs Dobson. Then you have Mr North, who is a nice youth, I admit."

"Mr North is a dear," said Mrs Eyrton; "but he is at work all day. Besides, he cares about nothing but strikes and labour questions. I hate labour questions."

"Then there is Mr Eyrton—whom I have not met," he continued, with an air of philosophic enquiry, which partly disguised the impertinence.

"Mr Eyrton hopes to see you at dinner. He is away with Sir Reuben Simeon at an electioneering committee."

"Then he concerns himself with politics—and labour questions?" asked de Cerjat.

"Very much—and business."

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"That does not sound exciting. You have children?"

She shook her head.

"I still don't see it," he said.

She lifted her brows in query.

"How you exist here."

"I think—therefore I exist."

"And you think of——?"

"Oh," she said, looking out over the valley in an absent-minded way, "all sorts of things—Paris, London, Italy. Tell me about pictures," she said, changing her tone. "I want so much to see this thing of yours in the Academy. I didn't know you worked in colour. Who has bought it?"

"Nobody, alas!"

"Why, all the papers raved about it."

"It's my gamble," he said. "I put on a big price. If I get it I shall be quit of pot-boiling for a while."

"Designing ramie stuffs," she said.

"There are mitigating circumstances," he answered. "If I stay down here at the hotel, and design them on the spot, will you let me come and see you sometimes?"

"Why not?" she answered; "artists are not so

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common in Stonedale. We shall be honoured," she added with a laugh.

Her pronoun was a rebuff—the retort entirely courteous, but a laughing rebuff.

He ventured a little further.

"If I find favour, perhaps you will extend your clemency. If I might hope that you would let me do some sketches."

"From the terrace?" she said. "Mrs Dobson will infallibly buy them."

De Cerjat preserved an unruffled countenance. "I was not thinking of landscapes. It is a theory I have of portraiture: that a portrait is generally a dead thing, because it is painted from a single pose of the sitter. Now, if you would let me make a few sketches of you, you would not be bored with an eternal attitude; out of them I would try to make something not unworthy of my opportunities."

"After all," he added, "you may as well be bored one way as another, and you know you are bored here."

"Perhaps," she said. "Very well, we will see. Ah! here is Mr Eyrton. And that virtuous Mr North has been doing all my duties for me."

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CHAPTER III

MRS EYRTON flung herself into the depths of a long, low easy-chair, with a positive energy of relaxation.

"Oh, Mr North, do get me a cigarette. These awful people!"

"What would Sir Reuben say if he saw 'our charming hostess' absolutely smoking," said North, as he held a match for her to light her cigarette. "He never calls you anything else."

"Ugh!" said Mrs Eyrton, "don't talk of him. Oh, what I have suffered this evening!"

"Sir Reuben," said Eyrton, who had finished lighting his pipe, "is certainly a complete incarnation of the nonconformist conscience."

He spoke in a dry, clear voice, well modulated, but curiously unsympathetic.

"Well, they have one virtue with it," said his wife, "they go to bed early."

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She sat up on the edge of her chair for a dramatic recital:

"'We are never later than ten, I assure you, Mrs Eyrton, that is our hour for domestic prayers.' Poor, dear Lady Simeon, I hope she likes the relief here. And she told me of the terrible things Sir Reuben endures when he has to stay late at the House."

"Or, to be accurate, the 'Ouse," said Eyrton.

North laughed.

"I must say I rather like the old lady. She's quite genuine, anyhow."

Mrs Eyrton contemplated her pretty toes for a moment, then flung herself back again into the chair with a cry of laughter.

"Such an evening," she said, "I feel as if I had been running a circus. Mr de Cerjat and the non-conformist conscience—poor dear Lady Simeon looking so puzzled."

"Sir Reuben didn't look puzzled," said Gerald; "he severely disapproved of Mr de Cerjat's conversation."

"I know. Wasn't I good, Julian? I talked to that old beast nearly the whole evening, and I did so want to go and chatter art shop with Mr de Cerjat."

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"I confess," said Gerald, "I partly sympathise with Sir Reuben. There were moments when I wished I could persuade Mr de Cerjat to play football."

"In order that you might play against him," said Eyrton. "Yes, certainly the natural man rises up in protest against that head of hair. Still, if it is not permitted to an artist to be fatuous, to whom shall it be permitted?"

"I think you people are so stupid," said Mrs Eyrton. "You want everybody to have been at a public school, and to wear just the same collars and cut his hair the same way, and have the same regulation ideas about how he ought to behave. Mr de Cerjat is an artist, and he looks like one."

"I've known a good many artists," said Gerald, "and pretty good ones, too, who dressed and behaved just like other people."

"You might even have taken them for bank clerks, I dare say," said Eyrton, with his characteristic hard laugh.

"Well, I don't care for bank clerks," said his wife, "and I like Mr de Cerjat, and he's going to do my portrait."

"I wish you joy of the experience," said Gerald.

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"That will be quite interesting," said Eyrton; "there's no doubt about his talent, I should say. We were talking over those designs for the stuffs, and he quite agreed that the thing to do was to avoid competition with silks, and strike out a new line, and get something telling for designs."

"Yes," said Gerald, "that seemed to be his view of the matter."

There was a slight ring of resentfulness in the way he emphasised the fact that Eyrton was taking credit for the new ideas.

"By the way, North," said Eyrton, changing the subject, "if things go on like this for another day or two, we shall have to test your sliding-scale arrangement. These fellows in Paris with their new process are underselling us."

"Oh," said Mrs Eyrton, "if you are going to talk about your stupid sliding scales and prices instead of Mr de Cerjat, I am going to bed. Good-night."

Gerald lighted her candle dutifully, and returned.

"I don't see why you call it my arrangement," he said, "but, anyhow, the case is absolutely foreseen. The profits have been ridiculously high all this time. I don't believe the Paris people can

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do the thing as well as we can, but they may very well be content with a smaller profit. We shall have to drop. The men fully accepted the principle that wages should vary with the price of stuff. Besides, you warned the men yourself that there could not be fat years for ever, and I know myself that lots of them have saved money."

"They were very willing to take the rise in their pay," said Eyrton, "but it remains to be seen if they will come down with the same easy grace."

"It isn't a question of gracefulness," said Gerald, "it's a question of good faith. They have got their combination, and they pledged themselves by their representatives. They can't go back on that."

"I hope not," said Eyrton, "but I think we shall hear a good deal about bloated capitalists as soon as we propose to reduce the wage."

"Very well," said Gerald, "you go to them and say: We have made money, so have you; you have been better paid than operatives were ever paid before at this trade, when you liked to work——"

"When," said Eyrton, "when you were graciously pleased to labour four days in the week. You know what will happen now. We have employ-

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ment for two thousand people, who work, on an average, four and a half good days' work. Supposing we put down the price of the stuffs, and the price of wages, all these people will expect to be given employment for five and a half days, and we shan't have the work to give them."

"That's their own fault," said Gerald. "The principle of the thing is plain to a child. You must just explain it to them. People in collieries work on this system, every one knows that. Why should they not here? What you have really to do here is to train these artisans to the true principle of combination and co-operation."

"It is quite plain in theory," said Eyrton, "but, in the first place, Dobson and Crawshaw will be afraid to put down the price; in the second place, the men will know they're afraid; in the third place, these gentry are not rational beings in the same sense that you and I are."

"Well," said Gerald, "it's our business to teach them to be rational. You've done well by them in giving them the high wages; and the best thing you can do for them now is to force them to take lower wages in the interest of the industry. They're much more rational than you think."

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"They have the short-sighted cunning of uneducated persons," said Eyrton. "They know that a strike would be ruinous to this industry at present, and they will use that knowledge as a weapon. You will find that they will threaten to strike."

Gerald got up, and leant against the mantelpiece.

"In that case," he said, "it is plainly for you to stiffen your back. If you give in on this point, you undo the whole of your work."

"I disagree with you," said Eyrton. "I have created a certain industry which is profitable to me and to other people. Now, I am very doubtful whether it may not pay me to lower prices and keep up wages. There will be no profit for awhile, but the increased sale ought to compensate."

"It seems to me," Gerald retorted, "that you are bribing the workmen to commit a breach of faith."

"Not at all. I anticipate the strike. It will appear as a voluntary concession. I grant you, if they struck, we should be morally obliged to stand out for the principle."

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"You don't suppose they won't know. You say yourself they know that a strike would smash the whole thing, and you suppose that they will expect you to forego profits in order that they may go back on their bargain. The moral effect would be just as bad as if they had struck, and, what is more, once you break down the principle, you will never be able to lower wages, and you can't possibly go on for ever paying as you have done while you had a practical monopoly."

"That, of course," said Eyrton, "is the real crux. Which policy is best for the business?"

"There's an old saying about honesty," said Gerald.

Eyrton laughed. "My dear North, that merely means that to be successful in business you must fulfil your legal obligations. Pay and you shall be paid. It does not mean that I am to ruin my business in order to uphold the blessed theory of co-operation. One has to oil the wheels. But you are right enough that the present rate of profits can't last, and that the wages must go down. I daresay I shall hit on some compromise; meanwhile," he said, getting up and knocking out his pipe, "will you see that the wonderful

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de Cerjat gets his designs done. I gather that he is going to stay on here. I hope he won't expect me to settle an indefinite hotel bill."

"I think not," said North. "He's a bounder, certainly, but not that kind of bounder, I should say."

"I should judge that the hotel bill would include an intolerable deal of sack, from his aspect."

"I have heard something of the kind," said Gerald. "In fact, perhaps I should have mentioned it before suggesting to you to bring him down, but I did not contemplate his establishing himself here."

"Oh, I don't think we need disturb ourselves. It is one of the privileges of genius, you know. Besides, he will amuse my wife, it will compensate her for the visit of that old bore, Sir Reuben, and down here it does not so much matter whom one knows."

Gerald North went to bed reflecting sadly on the moral deficiencies of his employer.

A year before, he and Eyrton had met in London, Gerald being then a briefless barrister, with a Platonic interest in labour questions. Co-operation and profit-sharing between employers

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and employed was the special subject of his studies, and he had been promoted to write articles on the subject in one of the more serious reviews. Eyrton, a man avid of new ideas, had read them with interest, and the end of it was a proposal that North should join him as private secretary to assist in his political ambitions, especially to scheme out and carry through the sliding-scale system in Stonedale.

The immense profits of the business in the last year, when the stuff was still, as Gerald said, a practical monopoly, but had become widely known, enabled the firm to pay such wages as had never been paid before in the weaving trade.

The experiment had caused much comment in the papers. Gerald had written a glowing account of its success; and the credit of the whole had come to the energetic and able junior partner in the fortunate firm. It was, Gerald recognised, highly significant that Eyrton should now speak to him of "your sliding scale." However, he had still a strong confidence in his own work, and he determined to do what in him lay to nerve Eyrton to resistance. But he felt sadly aware that his

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employer would take a line independent of those higher moral grounds and abstract considerations, which were so clear and so cogent to himself. And Eyrton's forecast of the men's action had depressed him considerably. He was well aware of Eyrton's shrewdness; still, he framed in his mind uncomplimentary epithets about compromise.

Then he fell to thinking about his employer in more general moral terms. It seemed to him singular that Eyrton should allow a person of such questionable reputation as de Cerjat to paint Mrs Eyrton's portrait, in a friendly way. As for Mrs Eyrton, of course, he reflected, she thought no ill. Bright and witty as she was, she naturally delighted in a change from Sir Reuben, whom Eyrton cultivated because of his political influence.

Has a man any right to ask people to his house whom he calls stupid bores, on the off-chance of getting something out of them? he pondered. Or, if he ask them to the house, has he any right to think them old bores?

Altogether, Gerald lay down to rest with a healthy sense of righteous indignation, and a particular desire to be rude to de Cerjat. It was

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extraordinary to him that women should tolerate a man who had that manner with women.

Nevertheless, it seemed plain that women did tolerate the man and his manner. But his righteous indignation did not extend itself to Mrs Eyrton.

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CHAPTER IV

DE CERJAT drew his palette-knife clean across the canvas with a smothered ejaculation.

"It's no good," he said, flinging down his brushes.

"Mr de Cerjat," said Mrs Eyrton, from the sofa at the other side of the room, "this is the fourth time I have heard that remark."

"I know," said de Cerjat, sitting down and dolefully contemplating his sketch.

"When am I to be allowed to see these things? I call it very unfair. It's rude. You won't believe me when I tell you that I know enough to be shown a half-finished thing."

"It isn't that," he said. "If it was anything else, you might see it and welcome. But a portrait is different. I don't want you to see anything till I have something worth showing."

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He nervously turned over some drawings in a portfolio. "Here," he said, "if you must see something, here's one."

He drew out a water-colour sketch and brought it over to her.

It was a study of Mrs Eyrton in a white evening-dress—the one she had worn on the evening of their first meeting. She was walking away from the painter—great coils and ropes of her ruddy hair were piled upon her head, clustering down on her neck, and made a sharp constrast with the delicate shell-pink of the flesh.

"Oh!" she said in a breathless sort of way, then she looked at it for a couple of minutes, de Cerjat watching eagerly, as an artist does, to see the impression.

"It isn't wrong to admire one's back, is it?" she said, after a pause. "Mr de Cerjat, I call that beautiful. It has got such charm of line as well as the colour; and how on earth did you make it look as if it was walking? Do I walk like that? I hope I do."

"That's it," said de Cerjat. "Motion is the whole thing about you. It's ridiculous trying to paint your face; you haven't got any features that

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I can see, it's just a series of lights and flashes, and you never keep the same pose two instants."

"Poor Mr de Cerjat! What a maddening sitter I must be."

"You are," said de Cerjat. "Maddening," he repeated, with a meaning inflection in his voice.

"Don't be rude," said Mrs Eyrton, ignoring the change of tone, "and show me some of the others. When did you do this one?"

"After your first sitting," he said. "The others are no good."

"Why do you tell me such nonsense? If you can do that, you can do other things. I believe you spoil them all at that stuffy old hotel of yours. Why won't you do what I ask you," she said, changing her voice to a kind of pleading note, "and come up and stay here? You could study my poses all day long then."

De Cerjat went back to his chair. "Thanks very much; it's awfully good of you, but I can't work among other people. Besides," he said, resuming his drawing-room tone, with the air of a man who snatches at a change of subject, "do you know, Mrs Eyrton, that, quite apart from the

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pleasure of your society, I find Stonedale a most interesting place of residence."

"I wish I did," she said. "What is the attraction?"

"Local politics—the strike—high affairs of trades unionism. In the fortnight I have been here, I have observed the process by which Mr Eyrton is converted from a model employer and the local benefactor, into a bloated capitalist and the oppressor of the poor."

"Oh, don't talk to me of strikes and trades unions, and sixteenths of a penny per pound. I hear nothing but that from morning to night—at least when my husband and Mr North are here. Most of the day they are interviewing deputations, and most of the night they are writing manifestoes. It all seems so pitiable and so pettifogging. Fancy all this fuss because ramie has to go down half a farthing in the pound."

"Still, I suppose," said de Cerjat, "a sufficient accumulation of half-farthings amounts to something considerable."

"Oh, what does it matter? We've all got money enough; it's only Mr Dobson who thinks he is going to be ruined. He comes here, and he abuses this unfortunate sliding scale and all new

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fangled theories, as he calls them. Then there's Julian, who wants to be thought the model employer, as you say, and to be an authority on labour questions when he gets into Parliament. He talks about the diplomatic management of large masses of men, and spends day and night palavering them. As if they cared. All they want is to get the best possible pay and the least possible work, and to have plenty of rabbit-coursing."

The artist sat watching her intently, as she sat up erect on her sofa, talking with every line of her body.

"And what does North say?" he added, knowing that he would draw forth denunciations.

"Oh, Mr North—I have no patience with Mr North. He wears himself out with talking about principles. As if Julian cared about principles, or the men cared about principles. He thinks you have only to get an idea into people's heads, and they will submit meekly to give up their chances of taking more than they ought, and will just content themselves with what they're entitled to. Poor dear Mr North."

De Cerjat looked at her sharply. "So you

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don't believe in principles?" he said. "You think every one should take the most he can get for himself."

"I don't believe in principles when they are things outside one. Mr North's principles are real things for him. But why can't he see that they aren't real for Julian or the men? And why can't they say plainly: We want certain things, and leave off maundering about rights? Julian talks about his duty to the industry he has created. The men talk about their duty to the sacred cause of labour. It makes me sick."

"And what is there to be instead of principles?" he said.

"Nothing. Be yourself. It isn't principles that makes a man behave like a gentleman. It's instinct. But I hate all these shams. One's business is to be one's self for all one is worth."

"Instincts," said de Cerjat; "instincts are sometimes troublesome things. Have you never found that? Suppose you have two sets of instincts."

"Of course I have found that. A woman has horrid instincts: they make her want to tell lies,

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and to conform and say pretty things when she really hates people. But you always know those aren't your real self. I sometimes think," she went on, "a woman does not really find herself out till she has a child. I wonder!"

"She certainly gets a new set of instincts," said de Cerjat. "But tradition is ten times heavier on her than it was before." He paused for a minute. "You would find it much harder to be yourself if you had children."

She shook her head.

"Anyhow," she said, avoiding the subject, "it is easy for a man, and especially for an artist. Mr de Cerjat," she went on with a quick impulsiveness, "you say I am a little bit of an artist. You will let me have the freedom of a comrade? Do you know I hate to hear unpleasant things said about my friends. And it is much worse when I can say nothing in return."

He got up and walked away to the window. It was a big room facing north, and a French window opened on the terrace.

"I know," he said. "It is very good of you to speak. But still," he said with a bitter laugh, "one must follow one's instincts."

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"But listen to me. You know quite well these things aren't your instincts. They won't let you be yourself. Why, you can't even paint—I mean the mere mechanical part of the trade—I can see your hand shake when you are working."

He looked out of the window away from her, and only shrugged his shoulders.

"What matter?" he said.

"But it does matter so much, my friend." She got up and came over to him. "You have so much talent. Why won't you do as I wish and come and stay here? I know about these things. Solitude is what does the mischief. Do come," she said; "I am so bored here with all this nonsense about strikes."

"You're too good, Mrs Eyrton," he said, turning abruptly away when she laid her hand on his arm. "I would give my soul to come," he said brusquely. "But there are reasons. Can't you understand?" he said, turning sharply round on her.

No woman could have mistaken the meaning in his look. Hers turned away from him, and she flushed deeply. Then, with an effort almost visible in her pose, she faced him and looked straight into his eyes.

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"I want to be your friend," she said, "and I want to be some use to you."

He looked at her again.

"I will do anything you like," he said, "if you will let me do it for your sake. If I say to you: I will not get drunk any more, will you let me say it for your sake?"

She hesitated. The words said little; but his eyes were passionate with meaning.

"I only want you to be your true self," she said, "for your own sake—for the sake of your art."

"Ah," he said, "words—words—words. How much has my art helped me up to this? I will go away and not disgrace your acquaintance."

His voice broke, and he walked away from her and flung himself into an arm-chair at the further end of the room, and, hiding his face in his hands, he broke into a passion of sobbing.

"Oh! don't do that, don't do that, Mr de Cerjat," she said. "Please"—she was herself almost on the point of breaking down—"for my sake, then, for any sake, do stay and get better."

De Cerjat pulled himself together and got up,

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looking a curious contrast to his usual complacent self.

"I will stay," he said. "You shall hear no more unpleasant things about me."

He gathered up his brushes and walked out of the house.

Mrs Eyrton still sat motionless in her chair, looking fixedly in front of her. "I never saw a man do that before," she said at last, quite aloud.

That evening at dinner she was alone with her husband and Gerald.

"So you had de Cerjat here to-day," said Eyrton; "how is the great work getting on?"

"He has done one very good sketch," she said.

"I wish to Heaven he would finish those designs," said Gerald. "But I suppose artists are above regarding dates in undertakings."

"Why," retorted Mrs Eyrton, "it isn't likely to make much matter. If the works are to be shut up indefinitely you won't be the better for the designs. Besides, he has done two, hasn't he?"

"I don't so much mind about the designs," said

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Eyrton, "but I wish that his personal habits were less conspicuous. He will end by coming here drunk, and Johnson will have to remove him."

"I suspect Johnson would enjoy the job," said Gerald.

"I think you are both very uncharitable," said Mrs Eyrton. "It would be much better, Mr North, since he won't come here, if you went down and looked him up, instead of saying nasty things about him."

"My dear," said Eyrton, "surely you don't want North to undertake the charge of a dipsomaniac."

Mrs Eyrton bit her lips. "He isn't a dipsomaniac," she said, "and he is a friend of mine, and I have a great admiration for him. Will you go down this evening, Mr North?"

"I would gladly, Mrs Eyrton, if you thought it would be of any service. But you see these memoranda have to be got out to-night."

"Certainly," said Eyrton, "at a more convenient season North may go and immolate himself. Why on earth won't the man come here?"

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"I don't know," said Mrs Eyrton, "but he won't."

"Well, I confess," said Eyrton, "his absence more endears him to me than anything else Now, North, if you are ready, I think we must tackle those figures."

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CHAPTER V

MRS EYRTON was neither so young nor so inexperienced as to be ignorant of what she was doing. On the contrary, she possessed just that incomplete knowledge and that desire for ethical experiment which renders many charming women the most dangerous creatures in the world.

By the time she was twenty-two, when she married Eyrton, she had already seen a good deal of existence. Brought up by rather straitlaced and conventional relatives among the uncongenial surroundings of a provincial town in the South of England, she had asserted her liberty on coming of age, and gone to study art in Paris. The pretty heiress was already aware of her own attractions, and various offers had been dismissed as unsatisfactory. In Paris, where she went without introductions of any

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useful kind, she very naturally drew the homage of many art students, and other ornaments of her half-Bohemian society. None, however, of these gentlemen succeeded in producing a distinct impression on her fancy, and Eyrton, whom she happened to meet, interested her considerably by his unlikeness to the rest.

He perceived very clearly, as he thought, that she would be an excellent wife for an ambitious man, with her unusual power of attracting notice, and her extremely feminine charm. Fortunately for him, he knew the English ambassador tolerably well, and by this means he was able to procure Miss Dalrymple admission into a society which was wholly new to her, and gratified her artistic feeling for that social distinction which surrounds power. She was admirably received. Eyrton, who, like other men, admired her exceedingly, showed his usual tact in making his addresses. He had no trouble in manifesting the necessary fervour, but he explained with the frankest candour, that not even for Miss Dalrymple would he have made a portionless match. He had, as he told her, a fortune which many men would count considerable, but to him was merely a

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possible stake in the game. If she would have confidence in his future, they could unite their resources and their social qualities, and he promised her, at the end of ten years, a position which money alone could not bring.

He had fairly kept his word so far. In the five years since their marriage, he had made that fortune which was the necessary foundation of his schemes. All his acquaintance, and it was a large one, were prepared to wager heavily on his ultimate success in politics. But in the meanwhile this marriage of ambition, though combined with a strong liking on both sides, had scarcely satisfied her. His very success tied him for the present somewhat closely to Stonedale, and it was the most they could do to manage a month in town during the season. She, of course, spent a good deal of time away from home, but still her husband expected her to help him to entertain useful people, and her heart was sufficiently in the game to make her very willing to accede to his wishes. She knew that it meant preferment in the long run to London and the position which she coveted there.

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But her forecast of the future did not prevent her from being bored in Stonedale; and the boredom was generally acutest in the summer months, after her return from town. De Cerjat had come as a perfect godsend. She had a really strong interest in art, and the man amused her. So the flirtation began.

Gradually it became clear to her that he was burning his fingers. As to that, she was philosophically indifferent. She had met the likes of him before; and, thought she, he probably has a grand passion once a year, with lesser ones to fill up the intervals. The man amused her; things were exceptionally harassing during this period of labour troubles, yet not, to her mind, exciting. Then came tales of his solitary drunkenness, which horrified the hotel people, who preferred these things done in a convivial way. Eyrton, a good deal annoyed, had been disposed to forbid him the house; but she had insisted, and, with a woman's instinct, began to feel kindly to the man she was championing. Also, she had a very serious admiration for his talent; and she determined to try her hand at proselytising.

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It was an excitement, and she had a good deal in her of the gambler's temperament, which in women, even more often than in men, finds its outlet in throwing dice for souls.

The last scene with him had shocked her a good deal, touched her not a little, and made her a trifle unhappy about the future. A man's tears were a new spectacle, and not a pleasant one.

Two days elapsed in which she heard nothing of him. Gerald North, who went down at her request to look for him, could get access neither to the workshop, which he had turned into a temporary studio, nor to his rooms at the hotel. The hotel people, however, volunteered the information that the London gentleman was turning into a blooming abstainer. Gerald cursed them for their impertinence in commenting on Mr de Cerjat's habits, and went straight back with the news to Mr Eyrton. He had a guess at the lie of things, and it increased his admiration for this truly admirable woman.

However, on the morning of the third day, Mrs Eyrton was surprised to hear de Cerjat announced at eleven o'clock. He had been in

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the habit of writing over night to ask for a sitting.

It was a sultry morning in July. She was sitting in her own morning room, which she had chosen with some idea of painting there, and, though she had long ceased to paint, it kept somewhat the air of a studio. De Cerjat's easel was set in a corner.

The house stood on a hill looking down to the river; the ground sloped sharply away, but round three sides—on the north, west, and south —a terrace ran. French windows opened on to the terrace from the different rooms, and Mrs Eyrton's was now wide open.

The room was a long, low oblong, with the window on the north side. The fireplace was at the west end, and near that end of the room, on the south side, was the door, which entered it from the central hall. The door was double, an outer one and an inner, the latter coated with green baize; and a *portière* hung across, so that it was the quietest room in the house.

Mrs Eyrton was writing at a table at the furthest end when de Cerjat entered. As she got up to receive him, she looked at his face with some

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anxiety. It was whiter than usual, and she felt his hand tremble as they shook hands. Decidedly she was rather uncomfortable.

"I got this last night," he said, handing her a letter.

She took it, a good deal puzzled.

It was from the Secretary of the Academy.

"SIR,—I have the honour to inform you that your picture, 'The Venus of the Brocken,' has been purchased by Mr Joseph Sugden at the price you put upon it, namely £1000.—I am, with congratulations."

"Oh, Mr de Cerjat," said Mrs Eyrton, sincerely delighted, "how splendid! How good of you to come and tell me! I do congratulate you."

She stretched out her hand in the impulse of the moment, forgetting her apprehensions. She was, for a second, the art student again, exulting with a friend on the first big hit.

He caught it in both his and kissed it passionately. That recalled her prudence.

"Moderation, my friend," she said. "But I am so glad. Do sit down and tell me who this delightful Mr Sugden is."

"What do I know?" said he; "some American or South African millionaire, I forget which."

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"Oh, I hope not. I should like him to be some one who would appreciate it. But do sit down. There's a chair."

She sat down herself on the sofa as she motioned to him.

But he remained standing, very white in the face, shaking, and with a fire in his eyes.

"What do I care for him or the picture? I have a cheque for a thousand pounds—and the certainty of more when I want it. Don't you see what that means?"

"I know very well what a thousand pounds means," she said, much embarrassed.

"Don't you see," said he, coming closer, "it means that I can say now what I have always wanted to say?"

"Oh, don't say it then," she said, getting up. "Do go away. You frighten me."

"You must listen to me. You have given me the right to speak."

"I never gave you any right," she said.

"Do you think I am a man of wax, that you can put over a slow fire, and he none the wiser? Don't you know why I would not come into this house?"

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"I know the reason other people gave," she said angrily.

"Because I wanted to make a sot of myself at the hotel? And you believed that?"

"No, no," she said. "You know I did not. But do go away, and come back when you are not so excited."

"Did you ever hear of a man drinking for forgetfulness," he said. "I have drunk for the sake of drinking before. But when I saw you, and saw that you were the one woman in the world for me, I swore I would never eat your husband's salt again; I keep that much scruple. I came to see you—that tied me to nothing. And you encouraged me to come."

"It is a shame of you," she said, "to cast up my folly to me like this. You know perfectly well I did not care for you. And you don't care for me. The only woman in the world! How many other women have you said that to?"

"There have been other women," he said, "but you are the only woman in the world now. And now I can say to you: Come away with me out of this stupid, sordid, money-grubbing existence. Come and be free. Come and live with your

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equals. Come and share the fame that I am going to have my will of."

He spoke eloquently, passionately, pleadingly, stretching out his hands to her.

She was horribly perplexed. "Oh! I wish, I wish," she said, "you would go away. I am very sorry if I made you think things. But, truly, truly, I don't want in the least to go with you."

"Ah, love," he said, "shake off these petty conventional notions. We will go into a world that does not care for them. Listen to your heart, and come with me."

Mrs Eyrton broke into a little laugh.

"Mr de Cerjat, you must not suppose that I am a conventional person. I have asked you to go away, and you do not go. If I were a conventional person I should ring that bell—no, you need not move, I am not going to ring it. But listen to me now. You assume a great deal —a great deal too much. You know very well that what you propose to me is not precisely an honour. A woman would have to care a desperate deal for a man before she would accept *that*. And I do not care for you at all that way. Only, I may have been foolish, and it

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may be my fault that you thought it. But, honestly and truly, I do not love you. And you only care for me just because I am a woman who talked to you nicely. Any other woman would do just as well."

He flung himself on his knees at her feet and seized her hands, and overwhelmed her with passionate entreaties, calling her his queen and his star, and begging her to have pity on him. Then he buried his face in his hands on her knees, and burst into a passion of tears.

Mrs Eyrton drew away.

"Get up, Mr de Cerjat. I cannot allow this. I must really ask you to go. You are beyond my patience. What you ask of me is dishonourable."

He got up, and for the life of her she could scarcely help a laugh at his tear-stained countenance. For all his hysterical displays, he was so obviously sincere, that she could not be angry.

"Dishonourable?" he said. "Why, you yourself, in this very room, said that we should be a law to ourselves. And now you talk to me about conventionalities—about honour. What keeps

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you? You have no children. Your husband? You know you don't love him."

"You have no right to discuss my feelings to my husband," she said. "Once more I ask you to go away. If you want me to think kindly of you, say no more things like that."

He laughed bitterly.

"Why, every one in the town knows that your husband neglects you. You told me yourself you were bored. And now—why, his intrigue with that type-writer girl is the common talk of the place."

Her head swam at the sudden insult. This was news with a vengeance. An entirely new set of sensations awoke in her.

He, seeing she made no answer, took her feeling as he would have it.

"Is it for a man like this that you would sacrifice your happiness?" he pleaded.

Instantly she turned on him with all her woman's anger, ready to sting and strike home now.

"My happiness! The blessed happiness it would be to be Mr de Cerjat's mistress! You must have a strange experience of women if you

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think to recommend yourself by lying about my husband."

A very ugly look crossed de Cerjat's face.

She rose.

"Go," she said, "unless you wish the servants to turn you out of my house."

And she made a step to cross towards the bell which was near the door. But de Cerjat stepped before her, his hand went to his pocket and flashed out with a revolver. He pointed it full at her. Instinctively she stepped back and sank on the sofa.

"You coward!" she said.

"Coward or not, it is this. You call me cowardly and ungentleman-like, because I want you to act on your own words. It may be low and cowardly, but it happens every day. I love you in such a way that I swear if I cannot have you, no man shall. Choose!"

She sat there looking up at him. There was no mistaking the delirium in his eyes.

"Choose," he said. "It may be low, but it's nature. Pot-house boys and drapers' clerks kill their sweethearts and themselves. The newspapers live on it. See the pretty paragraph we

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shall make to-morrow. You might as well come away quietly, it would make less scandal, since you hold so much by appearances."

She was absolutely alone with him, too terrified to scream. A screen was between her and the window, but a mirror hung opposite her. Suddenly, as she watched de Cerjat, she saw in the mirror a figure enter quickly and noiselessly by the window.

"Choose!" said de Cerjat for the second time, almost in a shriek, and again he levelled his pistol. At the same instant his hand was seized from behind; in the instant's struggle the trigger was pulled; there was a report and a crash, then Gerald had the pistol.

Mrs Eyrton, who had been sitting upright but motionless, as if paralysed, suddenly sank down in a limp mass on the sofa.

"Good God!" said Gerald, dropping the pistol, "she's hit!" But at the same instant, the sight of a broken vase two yards to the right of Mrs Eyrton reassured him.

"It's only a faint," he said. "Thank God!" and he moved over to lift her.

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In the moment de Cerjat had repossessed himself of the pistol, and held it doubtfully.

Gerald watched him.

Suddenly de Cerjat turned the muzzle towards his own breast.

"No, no," said Gerald quickly, "you mustn't do that here. It would be very bad form. Give me that," he continued, keeping his eye steadily on the artist. "Mind the trigger," he said, and coming up quietly, he took the thing by the muzzle. De Cerjat passively let it go, and threw himself into a chair. Gerald put the pistol into his pocket, and breathed freely. He walked across and rang the bell. "Now," he said to de Cerjat, "you hold your tongue."

The servant came in.

"Send for Mrs Eyrton's maid," said Gerald. "Mr de Cerjat was careless enough to let off a revolver," he said.

The servant hurried away.

Meanwhile, the unhappy youth was in no small trepidation about the lady. He laid her flat on the sofa, and then, with an inspiration, seized a vase of flowers, and sprinkled the water on to her forehead. She began to show signs of

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reviving, and Gerald handed her over to her maid.

He took de Cerjat, shaking like an aspen leaf, into the hall, and gave him some brandy.

"Now," he said, "as soon as we hear that Mrs Eyrton is all right, you and I are going to drive down to the hotel."

But before the trap could be got round, Mrs Eyrton's maid came from the morning-room, saying that her mistress wanted to see Mr North at once.

Gerald felt a good deal embarrassed. However, he turned to de Cerjat, who was sitting on a couch in the hall, limp as a rag, and with his head bent forward into his hands.

"Excuse me," he said, "I shan't be a moment."

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CHAPTER VI

MRS EYRTON got up to receive him, and came forward with her hands outstretched.

"Thank you," she said, taking both of his.

"Sit down, sit down," said Gerald nervously. "Don't talk about it. Are you feeling better now? I wish I could have prevented him from letting the beastly thing off, but I really knew it was quite safe. You see I pulled over to the right. Your poor china bowl is done for, I'm afraid."

He talked as fast as he could, not letting her get a word in. But she stopped him.

"He would have killed me, only for you," she said. "Think of that; and all that people would have thought. Mr North, you won't think horrid things, will you?"

She spoke in a broken voice—so broken he would hardly have known it for her's—and her whole body pleaded in her gesture.

"Nonsense, Mrs Eyrton," said Gerald. "The

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poor ass is off his head with drink, that is just all. Indeed, it is my fault for ever bringing him here."

"It was my fault," she said; "I know I did wrong. But, Mr North, you have saved my life."

He laughed.

"Fine heroism! To creep up behind a man and knock his arm up."

"You saved my life," she said, "and now I want you to do me a service. Go and look after him. See he doesn't do anything rash. Be kind to him."

"All right," said Gerald; "in any case I was going to drive him down to the hotel. I'll keep him company for an hour or two, and pack him off to town as soon as I can."

"Couldn't you go with him?" she said.

"I don't think so—with all this work just now. But you needn't be afraid. He'll be all right now. But I don't like to keep him waiting there."

"Very well," she said, "go to him."

He fidgeted a little.

"I'm unhappy about you," he said. "Won't you lie down? Shall I send your husband back?"

"No," she said; "I'll be all right. He will be

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back for dinner. Of course I will tell him all about it. You won't leave Mr de Cerjat before that, please."

"All right. I daresay I can be spared. *Il n'y a pas d'homme nécessaire.*"

"You were badly wanted a few minutes ago," she said, with a faint smile. "Now go—don't fuss about me. I shall be all right. And do be nice to that poor man."

"Since you wish it," said Gerald, and went out feeling proud and happy.

When a pretty woman shows gratitude by asking services of a young man, his soul brims over with an interest in her — chivalrous, delightful, and ensnaring. And the sight of a pretty woman, still tremulous with a danger from which he has rescued her, will fill any young man's mind for an infinity of happy moments.

Gerald's benignity extended itself even to de Cerjat, whom, a few moments before, he had been fervently desirous to kick. Now he felt a great pity overspread him. What more natural than that Mrs Eyrton's grace and charm should have turned the head of an impressionable artist to the point of actual insanity.

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He experienced precisely that emotion of benevolence which has been defined as love of power and delight in the exercise of it. Surely he would pour balm over this wounded spirit.

The trap was at the door when he got into the hall. He felt a good deal of constraint, in spite of his effusive sympathy, as he approached de Cerjat.

"Now, if you're ready," he said.

They got in, and Gerald ordered the groom to stay. He drove down the avenue and out on to the road without a word spoken.

It was an embarrassing situation.

Gerald at last began, after the fashion of this country, with an apology.

"I feel as if I ought to excuse myself for eavesdropping. The fact is," he said, flicking the horse, "I was strolling round the terrace, and I happened to have tennis shoes on. That was how it was you did not hear me."

De Cerjat, to his amazement, broke out into a harsh laugh.

"You Philistines are wonderful. Form—that is your divinity. It would be very bad form to shoot yourself here. It was really inexcusably bad form of you to come in upon a *tête-à-tête* without

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announcing yourself. It is very bad form to get drunk. It is very bad form to make love to your neighbour's wife."

Gerald felt his patience a good deal tried.

"I must say, it seems to me a most unfair thing to go and shoot a woman because she declines to make a fool of herself about you." Then he reflected this was not precisely fulfilling his mission. "And a very silly thing to go and shoot yourself just when you are making a big success."

De Cerjat looked out over the valley, and snuffed the air.

"After all," he said, "my wise young friend, I believe you may be right. Life is something."

"What would you do now," he went on, after a pause, "if you—let us make it palatable to your virtue—if a young woman had refused your hand and heart, and you had a thousand pounds to knock the bottom out of?"

"Can't say," said Gerald. "The case never presented itself—the thousand pounds, I mean. I know what you ought to do."

"And that is?" said de Cerjat.

"Go and take a bicycle tour."

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De Cerjat burst out laughing.

"Oh, ingenuous youth! Certainly I will not commit suicide while the world harbours such freshness."

Gerald was considerably annoyed, but repressed a desire to speak home truths.

"Would Paris now," continued de Cerjat, "have any substitutes for a bicycle tour?"

"I don't know," said Gerald. "I expect you would drink a devil of a lot there, and I expect it would be a devilish bad thing for you to drink a lot. However," he said sternly, as they drove into the town, "you may laugh at me for talking about form, but you can't stay here."

"How clever of you to find that out!" said de Cerjat.

They drove into the hotel, and Gerald gave the horse to a groom to put up.

"Look here," he said awkwardly, "if you're going away, let me help you to pack up. You must have a lot of things in that studio."

De Cerjat looked at him curiously. "So we wish to see the bad man off the premises—very well. Come in, signor, you are the master."

They went up into de Cerjat's room. Gerald

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pulled the revolver out of his pocket and put it on the table.

"Perhaps I had better restore that," he said, a trifle ostentatiously.

"Thank you," said de Cerjat, "how considerate, and how dramatic! How it testifies to your confidence in a poor sinner!"

Gerald's temper went.

"Damn you!" he said. "I stopped you from doing a beastly, low, stupid murder, and shooting yourself. I'm in no fear now about you. You may go and drink yourself to death, and be damned! Only, if you don't clear out of this before to-morrow, I swear I won't leave a whole bone in your body."

To his vast amazement, de Cerjat sat down on a chair and laughed immoderately.

"Sweet saint!" he said, "did I succeed in ruffling his angelic temper? My dear friend, do you suppose I don't know that you were commissioned to look after me? A charming woman's commission."

"If you have the wit to know that," retorted Gerald, "you might have the wit to be decently grateful."

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"Grateful — overwhelmed with gratitude, my dear sir. It certainly was very sweet and nice of her. But, you must admit, a little galling for me."

"I can't help that," said Gerald. "I'm sorry if I was clumsy. But," he said, regaining his temper with an effort, "look here, if you had sooner I went, will you give me your assurance that you won't stay, and—in short, that you won't make things disagreeable? Then I'll go at once. I beg your pardon for losing my temper just now. I know things must be hard for you to stomach. I ought to have thought of that."

De Cerjat contemplated him for a minute. Then he took out a cigarette and lit it, and looked at Gerald with curious, inquisitive eyes.

"I like you," he said. "Shall I prove it? Look here. You're young—you don t realise possibilities. I will give you a piece of advice." He got up and tapped solemnly on Gerald's chest. "Go back to her at once," he said. "Now's your time."

Gerald flushed angrily.

"Excuse me," he said, "I don't understand."

The artist contemplated him again, as if he were looking at a curiosity.

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"No, that is just it. You don't understand. Let me state it to you. Here is a charming woman, who, to put it plainly, wants a little change. She is bored. She finds life monotonous. She likes the colour of life. You know what that means for women——"

"It appears to me," said Gerald stiffly, "that your knowledge of women leads you to make mistakes at times."

De Cerjat blew away a puff of smoke. "We are not infallible when our personal feelings are concerned. I am a looker-on now, and I ask myself questions. Why did this charming woman not embrace the variety that I offered her?"

Gerald laughed angrily.

"Is it so hard to explain that any woman should resist Mr de Cerjat's fascinations?"

"Not hard," said de Cerjat. "On the contrary, it is plain. She preferred," he said, again coming near Gerald and tapping his arm, "some one else."

Alas for the vanity of youth. Gerald could not choose but listen to the sweet flattery—the acknowledgment of a rejected aspirant.

"Nonsense!" he said disdainfully.

"I do not say she is aware of it," said de

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Cerjat. "Nor he. That," said he again, after a significant pause, "is why I tell him. Consider," he went on, "the cards are all for you. You are the hero, the preserver; she is still in the effusion of gratitude. Take my advice—go back. You will see then if I am ungrateful."

Common-sense re-asserted itself in the well-disciplined youth. "My dear man," said Gerald, "you see everything through magnifying glasses now. Look here. Suppose I go back, I shall go and sweat at cursed figures. Mrs Eyrton, I hope, will be resting somewhere. We shan't meet till dinner. Now, I decided to take a holiday for your sake. If you don't want me, I'll go back to the figures. But I think you'll be the better of some one to let off steam to for a few hours. You look better," he said, with a laugh, "every time you say a disagreeable thing to me."

De Cerjat laughed too, pleasantly enough.

"Very well, dear youth. Fulfil your lady's mandate. It will all work out to the same in the end."

"No more of that," Gerald said; "Mrs Eyrton has been too much talked of here. You may try your tongue on me for all it's worth."

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"I don't deny the relief it gives me," said de Cerjat. "Come along to the studio. There will be a great burning. You shall be my only public—some one at least to look at the poor things before they go into the flames."

"We'll see about that," said Gerald; "but come on; I'd sooner rescue your works than rescue you any day in the week."

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CHAPTER VII

IT was a long day for Mrs Eyrton. An hour after Gerald left her, she felt that her meditations had covered a small eternity. All her nerves were jarred and jangled; and, forward or backward, there was nothing pleasant to look to.

Eyrton was away at the senior partner's interviewing a "conciliator." From a week's experience of these meetings she judged that it was only possible to say that the sitting would not be short. She was inclined to go for a spin on her bicycle to clear away cobwebs, but she wanted to meet him at once when he came back. She wished to get her story told him—it was not wholly an agreeable quarter of an hour to look forward to. Would he treat it as a confession? She was afraid he would, and the thought made her angry.

For there was another ferment at work in her

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She might, but for one thing, have been penitent over her follies, and penitent exceedingly over the prospect of adding to her husband's worries. As it was, she regarded the strike as a personal grievance; she was in no way prepared to make allowances for the irritation it would raise in his mind.

But out of all de Cerjat had said only one sentence remained active—burnt into her brain: "Every one in the town knows that your husband neglects you." She who had despised Stonedale and all its works—who had been at such pains to conceal her contempt; she was all the time a common subject of gossip. Stonedale, very likely, had the impertinence to pity her. It was unbearable.

She fought against the notion. She repeated to herself that the man had probably taken the first lie that came to hand. If it had been true, he would have been dishonourable at best to use such a weapon; since he had proved himself dishonourable, it was therefore all the more likely to be a lie. But she could not convince herself.

There had never been between her and her husband that passion which necessarily expands

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in confidences. She had never thought to be jealous of the past; there had been women in his past life, she always assumed it, and by a stray allusion or two, caught up with a quickness that she now recognised, she knew it, but she had never been jealous of her husband. She knew that his mind was wholly taken up with his schemes; she had his confidence as fully as any wife need have; she was proud of him, and always proud of her ability to help him. That carried her through a great deal of boredom, and though she had secretly resented his increasing coldness to her, she took it more or less as matter of course. It had never occurred to her to think of such cause for jealousy as this was.

He was not a man who cared to sun himself in the society of women. In London she had often wondered to see him leave the side of some pretty and gracious person to hang on the utterances of a third-rate politician, who might at some remote future be of use to this brilliant gentleman, who showed such intelligence as a listener.

It was not only jealousy that was up in arms —jealousy which, as the wise man said, is always

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born with Love but does not always die with him —it was hurt pride. She raged inwardly; all the more bitterly because she could not openly acknowledge—not even to herself—her mortification. She must disown even to herself a suspicion based on such evidence.

But she was eager to meet her husband—eager even to provoke a scene with him that would give her the chance to hint something. She might even say: "You may blame me, but directly he spoke against you I was angry, and I did not believe him." Then he would reassure her, or perhaps tell her the truth.

"It is so likely, isn't it?" she said to herself quite aloud. No, it would be better to say nothing of that. She must see this girl. If she looked at her hard enough surely she would know. She twisted the handkerchief hard that she held.

"Oh!" she said aloud, "if I only had a friend—only a friend! If it was true that this was talked of the other women would know it. I see myself going to Mrs Dobson or Mrs Crawshaw for sympathy," she muttered.

She fairly writhed in her chair to think of these

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women able all this while to look down on her, while she had thought herself so good to be civil to them.

Naturally enough her thoughts went back on Gerald. But that was plainly impossible. Still he was the one thing in her surroundings that she was not out of charity with. If every one knew he must know too; she did not mind his knowing. She would like him to be sorry.

Back and forward she twisted her thoughts; she tried books for quiet, but there was no anodyne in them for such a torment.

The servant came in.

"Please, ma'am, there's a young lady that wants to see you."

"Oh, tell her to go away—I can't see her. Who is she?"

"Please, ma'am, she's a young person from the works, and she says she wants to see you very particular."

A thought shot into Mrs Eyrton's mind.

"Very well, then. Show her in."

It was a pretty, black-haired, insignificant-looking young woman who came in, with swollen eyes, only half concealed by her veil.

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Mrs Eyrton remained sitting in her armchair.

"Please sit down," she said in her hardest voice. "May I ask your name?"

"Miss Smithers," the girl said tremulously.

"Miss Smithers," repeated Mrs Eyrton, as if she were testing the syllables for their musical effect. "Ah! yes—Mr Eyrton's clerk. I remember. Mr Eyrton is not at home, I am afraid. Can I do anything for you?"

The girl sat, nervous and uncomfortable, askew on her chair. Her fingers were locked together, and they twitched in and out. Mrs Eyrton watched her remorselessly. Decidedly she was likely to know more.

"It is about this strike, madam," she said.

"I am afraid you have come to the wrong person, Miss Smithers. I know nothing about strikes. I really take no interest in these matters." Then she looked hard at the girl. "You know that perfectly well. What is it you want to say to me?"

Her voice positively rasped as she said it. The girl began to break down; sobs shook her.

"It's about Mr Eyrton," she said with an effort.

"Mr Eyrton! Why, what can you have to say

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to me about Mr Eyrton? I never interfere in Mr Eyrton's business at the factory. Has he dismissed you, or do you want to have your wages raised?"

The girl made a great effort, and checked her sobbing.

"You have a right to insult me, Mrs Eyrton, and I see you know it. I thought you would find it out if I came here, but I did not think you would know. That makes it easier."

"I do not care to go into that. Will you be good enough to explain why you came?" said Mrs Eyrton.

"I came to tell you that Mr Eyrton's life is not safe if he stays here; you must get him to go away."

"Why, girl," said Mrs Eyrton, surprised out of her anger, "what nonsense is this? How should his life be in danger?"

"The strikers know that he has put down the wages, and they say they will have his life."

"Well, but why did you not tell Mr Eyrton himself?"

"I did," said the girl, flushing deeply.

"And what did he say?"

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"He only laughed. He wouldn't believe it. But, oh, Mrs Eyrton, it's true! I know it."

Many emotions were coursing each other through Mrs Eyrton's mind, but she had strong in her the artist nature, with its susceptibility to the immediate impression. The present pity was strong upon her. A great many of her theories represented not so much a belief as a re-action. She was unconventional very largely because the people whom she most disliked were conventional. And now she felt she had been acting as Mrs Dobson might have acted.

She got up and walked over to a seat beside the girl, who was obviously pained by her scrutiny.

"Miss Smithers," she said, "I was very cruel to you just now. But it is only a little while—only just this morning since I heard—about you. Tell me now what you have to say, and I will not say unkind things again."

The girl began to cry bitterly, turning her face away.

"O madam," she said, "I could bear hard words but I can't bear kindness." She dabbed desperately at her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief. "Won't you make him go away?" she said.

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"I'll go and get another place then, and you will never hear any more of me."

"Poor child!" said Mrs Eyrton, "poor child Come here," she said, and taking the crying girl by the hands, she made her sit down by her side on the sofa. "It is a hard world for women," she said. "Now, tell me all about this. I must know. What is this about danger?"

"It's all my fault," said the girl; "that's what made me come to you. I would never have dared, only I felt it was my fault."

"It was a hard thing to do," said Mrs Eyrton softly; "a hard thing for any woman to do. But what do you mean?"

"There's one of the men in the Union, madam—I can't give you his name, but he's a kind of leader among them—and he's set against Mr Eyrton, and he swears he will have his life."

Mrs Eyrton looked at the girl.

"On account of you," she said.

"He wanted to marry me," the girl said, "and he thought the reason I would not was only—because——"

"I know," said Mrs Eyrton.

"And the other men, you see, would not do it,

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but no one would give evidence against him now, and some think it would be a good thing to do."

"He told you this?" said Mrs Eyrton.

The girl nodded.

"And you told Mr Eyrton?"

"Yes. But you see he's so brave!" said the girl quite ingenuously. "He said he knew the man, and he wasn't afraid of his doing anything that would risk his neck."

"I see," said Mrs Eyrton. "Wait a minute and let me think." She got up and walked away to the window. "He's so brave!" Was that what her husband wanted from a woman—this ingenuous hero-worship?

This man, she reflected, was probably using the girl as a tool to terrify Eyrton into compliance with the strikers' wishes. She knew that her husband was in no way foolhardy, and that strikes did not lead to murdering of employers in these days. Still there was always the vague chance. But what filled her mind most was a curious personal interest in the girl. For her own part she had none of that hero-worship for her husband which was so eloquent in the girl's accent about his bravery. "Poor child!" she thought, "it is she

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who has shown the courage this day. Would I ever have done that for any man?" she wondered. For his sake the girl was willing not only to give him up, but to expose herself to so bitter an ordeal. "It's a hard world for women," she thought. A fear shot across her mind.

"Tell me one thing," she said, bending over the girl, and looking hard into her face. "If you go away will that be the end of it?"

"O madam!" she sobbed, "I promise you I will never try to see him again."

"I don't mean that. If you go away you won't have any one else to look after besides yourself?"

The girl hid her face. "No," she whispered.

"Listen, then. That is good. You shall go away—better go away where no one knows you. Go to London. I will give you money, as much money as you need until you can get plenty of work. You must not get money from him. Go away as soon as you can, and if you want help, remember I will always give it you."

"But you will make him go away," sobbed the girl.

"I will, I will, if it is really needed. You had best write me a letter—not signed—then I can

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speak to him. I promise you I will. Now go. Wait. You must give me your address first. Write it down."

The girl wrote it in a very tremulous hand.

"Then I will write to you. I am sorry I was unkind. Will you think of me as your friend?"

Miss Smithers was dissolved nearly into a pulp by protracted weeping. "O madam, madam!" she sobbed, "you are too good. I have been a bad girl. Forgive me. I will go away, and I will always be grateful to you."

"There, then," said Mrs Eyrton, whose nerves were beginning to wear out under this long and painful scene. "Go, child; don't talk of that."

Miss Smithers went as far as the door, then she turned round.

"You won't say I came here, please, madam."

"No, no, child. Go, now." When the door was shut on her Mrs Eyrton walked across the room and stood gazing out of the window. "Poor child!" she said softly to herself, "how she loves him. That is the real thing!" She flung herself on the sofa with a great cry. "My God! if I had only some one to love—and some one to love me!"

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CHAPTER VIII

IT was after nine that evening when Gerald drove back; he avoided dinner at Foxholme, which seemed likely to be somewhat of an ordeal. He was well contented with himself and the world as, sitting in the trap behind the fast chestnut mare, he pondered over the day's doings.

He went straight into the study. Eyrton got up quickly from the table where he was writing.

"Come in, North. I have a great deal of gratitude to express."

"Not at all," said Gerald. "I'm only glad I happened to turn up at the right moment."

"Mrs Eyrton tells me you showed the greatest coolness and discretion."

Gerald flushed with pleasure. He had certainly prided himself on his strategy. "I hope

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I may have prevented talk," he said. "Anyhow, I've packed de Cerjat off to London."

"I have been exceedingly thankful," said Eyrton, "that I did not happen to be in the house. The temptation to kick the gentleman would have been irresistible."

"You wouldn't have," replied Gerald. "He was too much upset. The poor chap was insane for the moment I do honestly believe—what between drink and the news that he had sold this picture of his."

"That is the way with these half-bred people. They have no sense of proportion—no balance. At all events, you saved Mrs Eyrton from what might have been very ugly consequences of her imprudence."

"I don't for a moment believe he would have fired," said Gerald, "but it was well to bring things to an end. As for the imprudence, I blame myself for bringing him down here; she naturally did not realise the sort of man he was."

"Women seldom realise anything that they do not wish to," said Eyrton; "however, thanks to you, no one is the worse of it. I have

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written Mr de Cerjat a cheque for his designs, and that will end the matter."

"I hope," said Gerald, "Mrs Eyrton is none the worse of her fright."

"Not at all, thanks. She will go away immediately for a change. We shall all be able to make holiday now."

"Holiday!" said Gerald, "what about the strike? You don't mean to say that you came to an agreement at the meeting to-day?"

Eyrton fidgeted a moment in his chair. Then he got up and looked for a pipe.

"Sit down," he said to Gerald, who was standing with his back to the fireless grate, after the custom of British youth.

He lit the pipe and sat down opposite to Gerald.

"I always think, North, that it is better not to trust a man by halves. The fact is, I received a note to-day from Bland, Sir Reuben's doctor, who is, as you know, an old friend of mine. He tells me in the strictest possible confidence that Sir Reuben's life is not worth a month's purchase. As you know very well, commerce is for me only a stepping-stone to other ambitions. But for this unfortunate strike

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I should have certainly been the successor to Sir Reuben in this division. If, however, he should die while public feeling is exasperated against me, I need not tell you that my chance of election would be gone. The British workman does not trouble himself about past benefits; he has only the liveliest sense of the favours to come."

"In short," said Gerald abruptly, "you propose to climb down?"

"I mean to suggest a compromise," said Eyrton.

"Irrespective of all that we have said and written as to the moral point at issue?"

"I have been careful not to commit myself definitely," said Eyrton. "You must not think, my dear North, that I have not the greatest respect for your opinion in this matter. You seem to me to have a complete understanding of the principles on which these disputes must ultimately be worked out, but the business of life consists in adapting means to ends. Now I am convinced that I can do more good in improving the relations between Capital and Labour, which is the real problem of the

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present, as a member of the House of Commons than in my private capacity. For that reason I am prepared now to make theory yield to practice."

"Surely," retorted Gerald, "that opposition of theory to practice is nonsense — a principle is either right or wrong. But I quite see that it may not be convenient to act on it," he added bitterly.

"I perfectly understand your soreness," said Eyrton; "you naturally identify yourself with this scheme."

"It is not a question of me. You identified yourself with the scheme which I drew up. I don't appear in the matter. Here we have been reproaching the men with a breach of faith; and now, directly a personal interest appears, you act in precisely the same manner."

"Exactly," replied Eyrton unmoved. "If other people were guided by abstract principles we could all follow them without difficulty. But that is not the way life works."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders.

"I propose," continued Eyrton, "to assert the principle of wages varying with profits as strongly

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as ever. But I shall suggest, as a compromise, that the present wages be maintained for six months, the wage to fall at the end of that period, unless the price rises again. Dobson will accept willingly, and I think the men are anxious for a compromise."

"It is only postponing the difficulty," said Gerald, "and weakening your own position."

"Many things may happen in six months," said Eyrton. "However, I think we may take it that this proposal will put an end to the strike. Mrs Eyrton is going to some friends in Ireland, and I think of accompanying her as far as Dublin myself; it is always well to avoid any possibilities of talk after this revolver incident. I shall make a tour, and see what I can find out about Irish politics; they are always with us. And I take it you would not be averse to a holiday after these last weeks."

"I shall certainly be glad enough to get away for a bit," said Gerald.

"Well, why should we not all go over together? You can go on to your people, and, I suppose, at the end of August or so, I shall be back here."

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"Very well," said Gerald. "How long will it take to cook the humble pie and eat it?"

Eyrton laughed.

"You need have no finger in the pie," he said. I daresay we could get off in three days if all goes right to-morrow. I'll draw up the notes myself. Good-night. You have done enough to-day."

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CHAPTER IX

FOUR days later they were aboard the Irish mail boat. It was a lovely July afternoon with a sea barely ruffled by the lightest of head-winds. Eyrton was reading a review on deck; Gerald stood looking over the rail, smoking moodily. Mrs Eyrton came up to him, a pretty figure to look at in her well-fitting travelling dress.

"Come and walk about," she said. "They say we shall be sighting the Irish coast directly, and you must tell me about things."

Gerald obeyed, but did not begin to talk.

"Poor Mr North!" said Mrs Eyrton in her caressing tones, "why are you so dejected? Oh, do put that beastly strike out of your head," she added, with a rapid turn of her head to him, and a little stamp of her foot. "We're going away

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for a holiday. There never was such a place as Stonedale at all. What does it matter? The hands are all back at work now, and we're all going to live happy ever after. Don't be serious. What is the use of vexing your soul about other people's principles? It wasn't your fault."

"I must be a fool to care about these things," said Gerald. "I'm very sorry, Mrs Eyrton; I can't help it. I beg your pardon for boring you," he added, with a rueful laugh.

"Be nice to me," she said pleadingly. "I do want to have a good time now. I wonder if I shall be horribly bored at the Martins?"

"They're nice people, aren't they? And it's a delightful country. Hallo!" he said, "Look here. There's Ireland."

Sure enough, the Dublin hills were lifting already a blue profile against the blue water.

"You'll be between the heather and the sea," he said, when they had discussed the probable distance they were out, "up there, in the glens, and that is always my notion of Paradise. My Paradise would always have a salmon river and a sea-lough and heather mountains."

"I wish you were going to be there, too," she

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said. "It would be great fun to make you show me round Paradise. I should like to see you on your native heath. I don't believe you would talk about strikes and moral principles there," she added maliciously.

"You bet!" said Gerald. "I would teach you to fish for trout—that is," he said, correcting himself, "if it was a nice, calm, sunny day."

She made a face.

"Do you suppose I'm afraid of rain? I'm going to wear such lovely, business-like homespuns and such enormous boots," she said, with a glance at an adorable foot in the neatest possible tan shoe.

Gerald laughed cheerfully.

"I don't doubt you. I'd like to see the turn-out. But the reason why fishermen like to teach ladies trout-fishing on sunny days is, that on those days they have nothing better to do. You can't catch salmon on a fine day."

"Oh!" she said, "so you imagine you are to have all the fun, and we only come in to amuse your leisure moments. Very well, now, Mr North, I will get the Martin boys to teach me to catch salmon, and I'll bet you I catch more than you do next month."

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Gerald looked up at the sky. "With this confounded fine weather it's very likely," he said. "You are just the person to beguile some misguided youth into letting you poach them with a triangle. Women have no conscience."

"I don't know what a triangle is," she said, "except, that I suppose it's not a square thing; but I do know that you have an absurd conscience. You don't give it enough work to do and it gets out of hand."

Gerald laughed again.

"It's delightful to talk nonsense again. I haven't talked nonsense for weeks. This is the beginning of the holidays. You will talk plenty of nonsense in Ireland, Mrs Eyrton."

"Not I. I'm going to be serious and catch salmon. How jolly the coast-line is! Tell me now what all these hills are."

He showed her Howth and the rounded Wicklow Hills, and the peaked outline of the two Golden Spears, which mortals call Big and Little Sugar-Loaf. Then an idea struck him. "Look here, Mrs Eyrton, up there, in those hills, it's an easy bicycle ride to one of the nicest Paradises I know. If I stop a day at the hotel, will you let me take you up there?"

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"That sounds rather jolly," she said. "I suppose we could get back in time for dinner. Julian is sure to want to go and hunt up politicians in the morning, and he's going to this big meeting in the afternoon."

"Very well," he said, "I'll introduce you to Irish scenery then. There aren't many things anywhere nicer than this particular Paradise on a good day, and it looks as if it wouldn't rain for a week."

"And you'll promise not to bother any more about strikes," she said appealingly.

"There aren't any strikes in Paradise," he said. "Besides," he went on, looking sharply at her, "you look better now, but the last few days you haven't looked at all pleased with the world. I'm afraid you got a bad shock."

"Things weren't quite nice," she said, "but that's all over. I'm in a holiday humour now, and we're going to Paradise to-morrow. Mind, I hold you responsible for its being Paradise."

"Oh!" he said maliciously, "if you're in a holiday humour, what a pity de Cerjat isn't here. Are you like enough to relent?"

"Don't talk about disagreeable things," she said.

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"Look at those herring-boats. Aren't the brown sails nice with the sun on them?" She looked eastward. "England's out of sight," she said.

"Rather!" said Gerald. "Stonedale's over and done with. We're going for a holiday."

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CHAPTER X

THEY had spun cheerfully along the broad, high road which leads southward from Dublin; the sun was bright, but not heavy on them; trees lined the road, and they dipped in and out of the cool shadows thrown across it. Big soft, white clouds floated in the sky; the atmosphere was full of the shimmering opalescence that makes Irish skies different from any others. Dublin Bay stretched blue on their left, Howth was a purple mass against it, and in front of them Killiney Hill outlined its delicate profile. But now they had turned up a long, steep hill, miles of it almost without a level, and they walked steadily, she protesting that his Paradise was not the Paradise of cyclists. As they wound their way up and round the shoulder of Three Rock Mountain, the Wicklow Hills rose beyond the southward

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slopes, peaked blue apparitions, fantastically sharp against the sky. But they turned their backs on them and on the sea, and she declared that they were leaving beauty for the desert. When they struck the level they were in a valley, bleak and desolate even in July. Nothing was to be seen but the brown of heather and softly rounded hills that rose and shut out the view on every side. Gray roads made lines across this wilderness. It was level going for miles, and they whirled along, passing a few slated cottages at intervals; then, as the valley closed in, it grew wilder and wilder still. Geese strayed along the beaten grass path by the roadside, that told of bare-footed traffic; ragged colts stared at them over crumbling stone walls, and plunged away among rocks and pitfalls. But the stone walls were a glorious line of foxgloves just passing out of blossom. The valley was still sloping eastward when they reached the last cottage, a thatched ruin.

"There is no house now for three miles," said Gerald.

A soft breeze out of the west fanned them as they came quietly up to meet it, and now at last they reached trees. A little grove of larches grew

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to the left of the road, where it skirted a sort of cliff; fifty feet below them, among the thick roots, a bright peat stream danced and made music. On the right the mountain climbed steeply, great boulders of rock stood out; rabbits ran across the road, and dodged in among them. Now they crossed a bridge, and the plantation of larches was on their right, Scotch firs mixed with them; underneath was the lovely short coating of dry moss, strewn with pine needles, and the air was fragrant with pine scent.

"This is the Gate of Paradise," he said.

The slope grew a little heavier before they reached the water-shed, and they walked till they saw the glen run westward from them. On the right the Kings' Burying-Ground rose almost precipitously, covered with the fir-trees. To the left the long slopes of Featherbed rolled gradually upwards, purple and brown with heather. By the road on the left a bright green patch of bog, with yellow rushes round it, broke the monotony of colour.

"There is snipe-shooting in Paradise," said Gerald.

All was wood in front of them. On their left

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another stream had its rise in the snipe-bog, fed by innumerable rills from the breast of Featherbed, and an arm of larches ran up from the wood below along its course. Only to the westward was there a distant horizon, over the great central plain of Ireland, and that, too, disappeared as they went down the hill. The glen folded its arms about them. Trees and streams, rock and mountain, heather and bracken, hemmed them in on every side. Not a trace of humanity's handiwork, except the road curling down through the trees. When they reached the belt of larches by the stream Gerald stopped.

"This is part of my Paradise," he said.

He lifted the bicycles inside the little wall that kept the roadway apart from the larch-belt. Then he helped her over. Her hair was shaken loose by the wind coming up the glen, and tendrils of it strayed about her forehead and her ears. They went down to the stream and dabbled in the water, laughing at each other over the primitive toilet; then, where the grass was green and close under the larches, they sat down and ate like the gods on Olympus. Only Gerald's eyes strayed restlessly over the mountain side, seek-

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ing something. He would not tell her what he wanted.

"By-and-by we shall explore for it," he said.

When the sandwiches were consumed, and the claret ended, he offered to show her the rest of Paradise. It was on the other side of the stream.

"Can you jump it?" said he.

It was about eight feet wide. She put out her lips and shook her head doubtfully. He jumped on to an unsteady rock in the middle, and offered her his hand; instantly the stone wavered, and he floundered in over his ankles.

"Well," said he, "it is all very well for you to laugh"—and indeed the valley rang with her laughter—"but you may just profit by it."

Reaching up he caught her by the waist and lifted her clean across. No sooner had he set her on the far side than she pointed reproachfully to a place not fifty yards up stream where a big rock made a bridge that a cow could have crossed by.

"Look at that!" she said; "you are a leader of the blind Saxon indeed. If you had looked round instead of falling in, might not that have been better?"

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"I am sorry," he said, "but you had no business to laugh like that. Now, let us see if you can walk an Irish mountain."

And indeed she could. Light of foot as a kid she jumped or picked her way among the hummocks of heather. He applauded as he led her up the course of a tributary rill, that had cut a deep course for itself down the mountain side, though there was little water now to show for such an achievement.

Suddenly he espied a dusky green clump of a low-growing shrub along its bank, and dashed at it.

"Found!" he shouted; "here is the dessert of Paradise." And he returned, bearing a green stalk with three or four dark blue berries growing among the leaves.

"Why," she said, "they are only bilberries. I can buy them from my greengrocer."

"Mrs Eyrton," he answered, "you deserve that I should take you home this instant. I bring you into Paradise and you talk of greengrocers. These are the dessert of Paradise, because they are the only fruit that grows there, and when the day is hot, grateful citizens of Paradise are glad to get

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them; and it is a truly Paradisaic fruit for you never get tired of them. No one has ever succeeded in picking more bilberries than he could eat as he picked them. But you must pick them for yourself or they lose their virtue."

So up the water-course they wandered, picking bilberries as a thrush eats grapes, and chattering like starlings. Just the touch of his hands on her waist as he swung her over the water had broken the bar of reserve between man and woman, and the solitude did the rest. Up here among the mountains and heather how should they think of any one?

But in the slow progress, delayed with endless stoppages for plunder, quarrels over rival bushes, and all the lovely nonsense that comes naturally to the lips of a young man and a young woman, when they have no thought but to take pleasure in each other's society and the sound of each other's voices—hers was clear as a bird's note and soft as the running water—they came at last to a patch of green. The stream made a miniature waterfall; a trickle of water, not more than you would water a rose with, leapt down some six or seven feet, and below it a pool was formed deep

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enough to hide the bottom under the ripple, and wide enough to be the home of a river fairy. The bank rose clear above it to a man's height; a dwarf alder rooted there and hung over the eddy, and round the alder was the patch of close, crisp grass turf, such as you will only see on mountains.

At the sight of it she stopped.

"You heartless person!" she said. "You bring me out bicycling up a hill five miles long; then you take me climbing up a mountain on my two feet. I am going to sit down; your lordship may do as he pleases."

With that she settled herself down on a cushioned slope of the bank. Bilberry bushes grew behind her. He threw himself on the grass by her feet, and looked up at her and laughed. Her face was flushed and happy; the dainty flannel shirt which she wore under her little jacket showed all the white curves of her neck. Her lips were stained with bilberry juice, her hands too, and it gave her a vagrant irresponsible air that was terribly bewitching.

"You might sit for a picture of the Bilberry Nymph," he said, "with those bushes behind you.

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Won't you have just one more—two even? See, there they are on a branch just over your head."

She stretched back and pulled the branches down to her face, and picked off the berries with her teeth.

"The Bilberry Nymph," she said; "that sounds vulgar, somehow. Can't you find something nicer to say to me?"

"You are in Virgil," he said, "and you caught Silenus and daubed him over with bilberry juice. Will you be an Oread for the occasion? I give you a certificate for fleet foot on the correi."

"An Oread," she murmured; "yes, that is pretty. Do you know that you look much less serious when you have bilberry stains all over your face."

"No one wants to be serious in Paradise," he said; "and now, what do you think of my Paradise?"

She looked at him with a laugh. "And you, *monsieur?* How did you know it was Paradise? Am I the first Eve?"

He laughed back at her:—

"Two Paradises 'twere in one
To live in Paradise—alone."

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She made a face at him. "*Partez, monsieur. Plus haut.* Your way lies upward. Climb higher, and there will be no women."

He made a pretence of moving.

"No, don't go," she said; "your Paradise is certainly secluded enough—I do it that justice. But I don't think I like solitude."

There was certainly a new note in her voice; and he felt a constraint on him as he answered:

"Not as a change even."

It was said, not for the sake of saying it, or in the light-hearted dialect of ten minutes ago, but because something had to be said.

"You think I don't get much solitude, then?"

"No one less, I should say," he answered.

"Do you know, I am rather a lonely kind of person."

He said nothing now. He could not answer this voice; so he sat there and watched her. The sun was sweet on them, the air fanned them, the little fall with its plunge into the pool kept up a murmur. A bunch of purple heath that he had given her was stuck in her belt, and in his hand was a great wisp of bog-myrtle that he pressed his face to when it was awkward to look at her.

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"You see," she went on, "I haven't children. Then, I have no people of my own—I can't remember my father or mother. The aunt who brought me up was not any friend of mine—she just wanted the money she got for looking after me; and she was frightfully angry when I insisted on going away and travelling—we don't speak to each other since. Then up there in Stonedale, I ask you which of those estimable women am I to make a friend of?"

He felt as if speech was the only salvation. There she was, with her stained lips, looking at him—like that. There was Nature folding them round, hedging them in, pushing them to each other, but at least he could say the thing that stood between them.

"But Eyrton—but your husband?"

She laughed now—a bitter little laugh.

"My husband—yes. He has his ambitions; he goes his own way. He has——look!" she said suddenly, "you know that time you came in and saved me from that mad creature—I told my husband about it that he might thank you, and partly because I thought I ought to. I felt—you know—as if I had been to blame."

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She laughed again in the same harsh accent.

"Nonsense," he said, "what put such things into your head?"

"Well, my husband did not think so. He—he lectured me—I daresay he was quite right. Only—I did not tell him—that very day a girl came to see me——"

"Good God!" said Gerald, pulling himself sharply together, "what do you mean?"

"Oh, you know, I am sure. Every one knows—every one knew—except me. It was that typewriter girl."

"What did she do that for? I never would have feared that."

"You knew, then. Oh, she came to tell me that my husband's life was in danger—to persuade him to come away. It was likely, was it not?"

"That was hard on you—very hard. But it was hard on her, too."

"On the girl—poor thing! I don't think I was unkind to her. I sent her away comforted. Then there came the news about Sir Reuben, and we climbed down. And so we came on here."

There was a long pause.

"You see I don't feel very sociable towards my

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husband just now," she went on, "and to do him justice, he does not importune me for my society."

He lifted his head out of his hands.

"I am so sorry for you," he said. "I wish I could do something."

She laughed again in an unnatural tone.

"What could you do? After all, it's the world's ways. Men will be men, and women needn't always find it out—need they?"

Still he said nothing, but tore at the bundle of bog-myrtle which was in his hands, shredding it smaller and smaller.

"Oh, what funny people we are!" she began again. "We come up here to pick bilberries, and then we sit down and talk about our souls. Don't let us be serious. It's ridiculous to be serious with our hands all blue with bilberries."

She stretched out a hand and touched him on the shoulder.

"After all," he said, turning to her, "nothing in the world is serious. Let us get back to Paradise."

It was his voice now that had changed in tone; it carried a caress in it. He caught the hand that was by him. It was a hand a man might have

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spent his life in longing for. He kissed the stains on it.

"My homage to the bilberries," he said.

He looked up at her eyes; they avoided his, irresolute; but her whole body had taken a softer curve, and the hand still lay in his, thrilling and surrendered.

"You are not lonely now?" he murmured.

"No," the answer came quite low, from the drooped head, "I am not lonely now."

Nature purred over them like a cat with a mouse; bees hummed in the heather; both were heavy with the sweetest of all sweet wines.

Youth prolongs its joys. He held both her hands now, and delighted in her surrender.

"There are bilberry stains on your lips, too," he whispered, drawing closer to her. "You Oread —you sweet Oread."

She made no answer in words, but the white taper fingers curled round his like the clinging tendrils of a plant.

"My Oread!" he murmured again, drawing closer and closer, till his breath played on her cheek. He loved to see the quiver run through her. "My Oread—my sweet goddess!"

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Not Pan and his rout, nor Dionysus with all his bacchanals could have more abruptly broken in upon their seclusion. Down the valley came a rattle of wheels, the shout of a braying chorus, the strumming of a banjo. They started apart, guiltily. From their nook, hidden in the heather, they could see the road below them; half a dozen cars were pelting down it, laden with excursionists happy in their outing; and these also pulled up not fifty yards from the spot where Gerald had left the bicycles.

The Paradise was shattered, the sweet intoxication rudely dispelled.

"Come," she said, getting up, "I think we must be getting home."

They walked down the stream, she leading, he following disconsolate with a helter-skelter of thoughts flying through his brain. They had to pass through the rout of clerks who winked and nudged one another till Gerald could scarcely keep his hands still. They mounted their machines and rode off without a word spoken. Not a word did she say, nor he a word, except of warning at corners, all the long miles down hill. Once there was a short rise.

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She looked white and fagged.

"Are you tired?" he said. "Sit down and let me get you a drink from the stream."

"No, no," she said hastily, almost angrily, "let us get on home—we are late."

Only as they walked into the hotel did he speak to her again.

"I am so sorry. Forgive me."

"Don't let us talk of it. Forget it all. It never happened," she said, hurrying upstairs to the private sitting-room.

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CHAPTER XI

IN five minutes came a summons to him. Mr Eyrton wanted him. He went up feeling guilty and abashed. There, to his surprise, was his chief with a telegram in his hand and a countenance of immense excitement.

"It is very fortunate you got back early. Look here, I have a telegram from Bland saying that Sir Reuben has had another stroke. Of course, you see, I can't go back; it would look indecent. Perhaps, indeed, it is just as well I am away. But I want you, if you don't mind, to go back to Stonedale at once. You can see Dobson and old Crawshaw—I think the motion ought to come from him. Represent to him the advantage it would be to the firm. Dobson will approach the Mayor. The newspaper people you might see at once—directly the death is announced, I mean—or as soon as you see any-

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thing in the papers. The *Leader* man I can trust, I think."

All this fell in a torrent on Gerald's astonished ears. Busy with his thoughts he had not the time to frame a sentence.

"You see," Eyrton went on, "I have implicit confidence in your tact. I can't say more now, for I have just to go and see some rather influential people here; we may have the Chief Secretary there. You could not start by this afternoon's boat in any case. But I can count on you for to-morrow morning, cannot I? Then we dine at the Castle to-night, and there is the ball afterwards. We may be late; and it would hardly be fair to keep you up all night."

Gerald murmured a protestation.

"Oh, you will have work enough these next months. We shan't have long to wait for the Election now. I will write you directions—just a general line of country. But I trust entirely to your judgment. And there are things that can be better written. I must be off now," he concluded, and hurried out of the room.

Gerald wandered sadly to his own quarters. This indeed was the irony of existence. All

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the way home one bitter reflection had been with him. He had done the thing that disgraced him; he had been false to his salt. So far as intention could go he was totally guilty. Yet he was unrewarded. He had sold his soul and got no money for it—not even a sweet delicious half-hour to look back on. Of course the stars in their courses had fought to throw her into his arms—the day, the place, the hour, the sunshine, the scent, the sound, and with that the recent memory of resentment; it was scarcely her own self that had spoken, but the inarticulate voice of Nature. Then had come in Society—Man, the gregarious, with his conventions, his winks, his nudges, his accursed presence. Damn them! So the dream was shattered. They were warned now, they were on their guard, such a lapse could not repeat itself. But he had looked forward to an explanation. At least she would thank him that he had not spoken of it—after many days. They would have in common some sweet secret regret—for he knew she must still have enough human blood in her to regret the lost hour—the hour and the place that had for once chimed so sweetly together. Now he was to go away—

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to lend himself to petty intriguing for a man whom, in his heart of hearts, he hated — the man who had wronged and neglected her, if there were no other counts against him. She would have time to recover, and when they met no trace would be left of the dear tumult. Worse still—horrible thought—a woman in her suspense, buffeted to and fro between opposing reactions, was the ready prey of the first man who might meet her. At least he would try to keep what he had won. Something he must invent, devise, or discover — some means to keep himself in remembrance.

Was there no way to see her again. He strayed out into the hotel, and wandered about desolately, living over again and again every moment of the day.

Eyrton, after an hour or two, came bustling back again, and rushed off to dress. Presently he and his wife came down the stairs. She came up to Gerald instantly.

"O Mr North, isn't this exciting? Don't you hope we shall get in? It is so good of that old Sir Reuben to die. But it must be a horrid bore for you. I suppose I shan't see you again till we

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are back in Stonedale. Good-bye. Mind you get us in."

And with that she hurried into her carriage leaving Gerald in black despair. He dined moodily, and strolled out into the square. It was midsummer, and twilight barely had begun yet. A thought struck him. He went back to the hotel for his bicycle, and sped down the south road. Two hours later he was back in the glen. It was lonely indeed now. The moon shone bright on him—kindly as the sun, but so far colder—as he tracked his way up the little torrent. There, by the grassy patch, he knelt down, and kissed again and again the bank she had leant on. Then he gathered bog-myrtle and bilberry and heather, and bound them together into a bouquet, and with a heart lightened alike by the fancy he had carried out, and the thought of her surprise, he made his way back to the hotel. It was not yet midnight: the Eyrtons could not be back for a long time. So he stole into Mrs Eyrton's room, and set his bouquet on her table.

Not much sleep was his that night, and he was ready, dressed, when the servant called him at half-past five. He went downstairs and breakfasted,

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then he remembered that he must go to the sitting-room for his chief's note. He went in; it was on the table; but before he could go Mrs Eyrton's door opened, and she came in.

"What on earth is this, Mrs Eyrton? Are you going cycling before breakfast, after dancing till Heaven knows when? Certainly the air of Ireland has gone to your head."

"I think it has," she said. "I couldn't sleep."

She looked pale enough. He watched her with a hard fight going on in him.

"So I came in to thank you for your bouquet," she went on. "It was so nice of you. Where did you get it?"

"Where did I get it?" he answered her almost angrily. "You know well where I went to get it—I would have gone there barefoot to get it. Did you think I bought it at your greengrocer's?"

"Dear me," she said, "what did you leave there that was so precious? Could it have been a cigar-case?"

He set his teeth hard before he answered.

"Very well, if you want to know, you shall. I went there to kiss the ground you sat on, and the place where I held your hands. And the whole

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way there and the whole way back I cursed those people who robbed me. Evelyn," he said, going close up to her, "will you give me now what they robbed me of?"

In an instant she was in his arms. Their lips were passionate in kisses, and between the kisses was a ripple of broken words.

She clung to him as he tore himself away.

"I must go, I must go," he said. "Only remember, by this—and this—and this—you are mine. You belong to me now. We will go back to Paradise."

He broke away, but turned at the door; she had fallen into a chair, limp and lifeless. One moment he came back and pressed kisses on her hair, her eyes, her forehead; then he went out into the chill morning, drove to the station, took his train, and got on the boat moving almost like an automaton, but with his brain whirling wildly.

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CHAPTER XII

GERALD'S thoughts, as he paced up and down the steamer's deck, were simple enough at first—sensations, indeed, rather than thoughts. He looked at Dublin receding further into the distance with every throb of the engines, and there was the true love-longing in his face. Separation came to him with that actual sense of being torn away.

But dominant in his mind was the mere masculine exultation, the triumph in conquest, surging up, drowning all reflections in a passion of vanity, drunk with its supreme gratification. He looked neither back nor forward, yielding absolutely to the voice of delight within him. "She loves you! she loves you!" it said; and memory translated that into the passion of her eyes and her lips, the convulsive clasp of her arms.

Gradually other thoughts whispered to him

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but they were smothered at once. Eyrton?—Well, what of that? Put Eyrton in his place, and would Eyrton be scrupulous? No one said these things were right; but who would refuse so much sweetness? Besides, she wanted him; and what should weigh against that? After all, it was Eyrton's fault. If he chose to neglect his wife, why should not another man give her love? For himself he only owed Eyrton his service; that he would pay him fully.

He remembered his commission, and took Eyrton's letter from his pocket. It began with instructions to him to see the partners, and M'Kinnon, the newspaper man. But there was a final page.

"Lastly, I have to confide to you a very delicate and somewhat disagreeable mission. The only person in whom I detected, during the late strike, any personal animosity against myself was the egregious Bonsor. He has been pleased to cast sheep's eyes upon Miss Smithers, and attributes her refusal of his charming person to my influence. He mentioned to her during the strike that he was contriving my death, and she, as no doubt he expected, repeated the tale to me. I need not tell you that I paid no attention to his menaces knowing the sort of person he is. He has a long tongue, however, which gives him a certain weight with the men, and he would be quite capable of seeking to revenge himself for his supposed injuries by spreading

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reports injurious to the young lady's reputation in the hope to damage me.

"The only thing to do in such a case appears to me to be the employment of threats and bribery. I need not caution you against committing yourself to paper. You had best see the man, and ask him if he will act as assistant to my electioneering agent. It will be quite superfluous for you to mention any names.

"Perhaps, also, it may be wise to remove the original object of this scandal. Will you give the enclosed note to Miss S——. She will, of course, receive ample compensation.

"I cannot more completely show my trust in your discretion, and I am, my dear North, yours most sincerely—

"JULIAN EYRTON."

Gerald broke into a harsh laugh. "Certainly," he said to himself, "I may boast that my employer gives me his full confidence. Very well, I will do his dirty work for him. But I will be paid for it."

He read through the letter again to fix its directions in his mind, then tore it into little pieces, and tossed it over the side of the boat. The enclosure to Miss Smithers he put carefully into his pocket.

He resented the ugly intrusion upon his roseate dreams. Life seemed vulgarised for him. He was taking Eyrton, he reflected, on his own terms;

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he was joining in a game and playing it in the spirit of its traditions. It was not exactly an ennobling occupation. He set himself to drown reflection with imaginings of forbidden sweetness; he schemed out future meetings. He could not write to Mrs Eyrton till she went to the Martins, but he began a letter to her full of passionate, caressing words and broken sentences.

Yet for all he could do he could not bring back to himself the radiant triumph of the morning.

Love is always beautiful — even when it is wrong—if it be love, not the mere gratification of desire, but a leap into that paradise of perfect companionship which can only exist between man and woman where neither thinks of a separate self or a separate interest. And love can, out of the mist of tears and laughter and kisses create a veil which, for a little while, hides from the lovers everything in the universe but themselves. But sooner or later a wind must come that sweeps away the soft mist, and presents to the sobered intelligence the somewhat unexhilarating vision of things as they are. Love, then, becomes a terribly exacting critic of itself and the loved one: it sees with a flash. If all is well, if things that are are much

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as they ought to be, Love is well content to lie about and bask in the common sunshine; but if things that are are precisely as Love would desire that they should not be, poor Love falls to spinning mists again with a sort of feverish energy, and the atmosphere about him grows hot and heavy.

Gerald did not like the vision of things as they were, and from the imaginations with which he surrounded himself the dew of the morning had disappeared.

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CHAPTER XIII

GERALD valued himself exceedingly upon his diplomacy, and when he got out at Stonedale that evening he had his plan of operations ready. The partners had to be seen first. Old Mr Crawshaw — an old gentleman singularly averse to new ideas, who had been all through his long life a pillar of the Radical party in Stonedale—was the main point of difficulty. Gerald therefore decided to begin with Dobson, and reserve his strongest inducements for the other.

He drove straight up to Dobson's abode, and was shown into the dining-room where Dobson himself, surrounded by pictures once the glories of Burlington House, was sitting over his cigar.

"Hallo, North!" he said, "I thought you had gone off to Ireland?"

"So I did," said Gerald, "but here I am again. Eyrton was nervous about things, so he asked me

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to come over and see that all went well. He was afraid you might hesitate to bring him back. There's no hitch, I hope."

"None in the least," said Dobson. "Why should there be?"

"Well, you see," said Gerald, "Eyrton took this strike business pretty hard, and I think it has upset his nerves a bit. He wants a holiday. I hope you're all right yourself. It was a pretty tough time."

"I can't afford the luxury of nerves," said Dobson.

"Ah!" replied Gerald admiringly, "you trained business men are a wonderful race. Eyrton can get through a surprising deal of work, but it always tells on him."

"By the way," said Dobson, "did you hear about Sir Reuben?"

"I saw it in the Manchester evening paper," said Gerald, who bad been anxiously hoping for this lead. "That was why I came up here to-night. I wired to Eyrton for instructions. It seems very unlucky that he should not be on the spot."

"You think he would like to stand?" said Dobson.

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"I know he would," replied Gerald. "With his talent for speaking he naturally wishes to be in the House; but I know that he would particularly desire to represent a Division in which he has so strong an interest. I know also," he added, "between ourselves, that the central authorities have twice over asked him to be a candidate for other constituencies, and he has declined." Gerald did not add that in both cases there was every likelihood of a losing fight.

"He ought to stand a good chance," said Dobson.

"It seems to me," said Gerald, "that it would be an admirable thing for the firm. He is sure to make a good figure, and the bigger this ramie business grows, the more need there will be of some one to represent your interests. No other man could do that as Eyrton could. Even you yourself," he went on, with his most engaging manner, "are identified by traditions rather with the old weaving industry than this new thing. But," he went on, after a moment's pause, "I am convinced that Eyrton's loyalty to you as the senior partner in the firm is such that he would be well disposed to waive his own claims

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if you thought of standing, and indeed I should like to be able to assure him that you do not contemplate it."

Dobson was by nature, as Gerald well knew, the least enterprising of mankind.

"Oh no, I assure you, North," he hastily replied, "I never thought of such a thing."

"Then I may assume," said Gerald, getting up, "that Eyrton, if he is nominated, can count on your support. I am exceedingly glad to be clear of that. The truth is, that I had some apprehensions of Mr Crawshaw's standing."

Dobson, whose education had comprised a brief career at the university, had the deepest contempt for old Crawshaw, who had, as he boasted, begun in his shirt sleeves. He, therefore, shook the head of complete reprobation.

"That would never do, North; certainly that would never do."

"Well," said Gerald, "I will go on and see him at once. I am sure that the senior partner's wishes will weigh with him in the matter."

Gerald accordingly made the best of his way to Mr Crawshaw's, and though he got there by nine o'clock, was greeted with some surprise as

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a late visitor. Luckily for him, he was something of a favourite with the old man.

"Well, lad, what dost want?"

There was no use beating about the bush with this blunt old gentleman, so Gerald came straight to the point.

"You see, Sir Reuben's dying, Mr Crawshaw."

"It's like he's dead by this. He was no more than a soft bag of a creature."

"Well, you know, Mr Crawshaw, my chief would like well to be in Parliament."

"There's more nor he would like that, lad."

"Yes; but look here, Mr Crawshaw, Eyrton wouldn't find much bother about getting in somewhere, but he wants to sit for the Stonedale Division. And I think there's no man that has a better right."

"Happen the Union men will have a word to say to that, lad. What about the strike?"

"I'll do my best with the Union men, Mr Crawshaw," replied Gerald; "it's you I want to get. Eyrton's not here himself, or he'd come to you first, I'm sure."

"It's easier saying nay to thee, lad," was all the response he could get.

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"Come now, Mr Crawshaw," said Gerald, "Eyrton's done well by the place. How much has ramie put in your pocket?"

"I'm not saying anything against ramie," retorted the old man with a grin, "but Eyrton has done none so badly for himself, too. Why should I be putting myself forward to oblige him?"

"Just because you're the man can do most. You've known Stonedale, man and boy, I suppose, sixty years."

"You may say seventy," said the old man.

"And all Stonedale knows you, Mr Crawshaw. Well now, I ask you fairly, is there any man that's done more for the place than Eyrton?"

Old Crawshaw sucked at his pipe. "Who's to say that?" he asked.

"You know right well there isn't," said Gerald. "Now, you're the oldest member on the Local Executive, and Eyrton's your partner. There's no doubt his name'll be put forward, but if it isn't you that puts it forward, I think you should have reasons for not doing it."

"Eyrton has notions I don't hold with," grumbled the old man.

"Well, but Mr Crawshaw, where's the candidate

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going to come from that will please you, I wonder? I never heard you say a downright good word for any man's politics yet," said Gerald, laughing. "I suppose you think they'll send you down a special angel from the National Liberal Club."

"We'll have no carpet-baggers in Stonedale," retorted Crawshaw.

"Will you have a Labour member, then?" said Gerald, knowing the old man's pet abhorrence.

The argument went on for close on half an hour, till old Crawshaw remarked that it was bed-time, and Gerald extorted from him a grudging promise to propose Eyrton's name. Gerald went off, well satisfied, knowing that the veteran would be better than his word, and that his voice carried weight in Stonedale.

There was still the *Stonedale Leader* office. While Gerald was waiting to see the editor, he glanced down the advertisements, did a rough sum, and realised that the firm was an important factor in the prosperity of the *Leader*. Nevertheless, the paper had taken a line in favour of the strikers, and Gerald had been charged to write various letters to it in comment upon their articles. He adverted civilly now to this, spoke flatteringly of

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the power of the Press, and hoped that the editor would not use it to keep up old animosities. While he was in the office a telegram came in announcing Sir Reuben's death, and the editor, without difficulty, allowed himself to be persuaded to a mention of Eyrton's name as the natural and fit candidate for the Division.

This mission also accomplished Gerald procured a cab, and, congratulating himself on the adroitness which he had so far displayed, drove out to Foxholme, too dead beat even to review the events of the past day. But a dim and confused impression of triumph was in his mind as he tumbled into bed, and fell instantly dead asleep.

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CHAPTER XIV

GERALD awoke next morning after a heavy dream-laden night. He dressed himself quickly, realising that the most awkward part of his mission was yet to be accomplished. Mrs Eyrton made the background to his thoughts; yet of her he could not think with any pleasure. Her image wakened a struggle in him at every moment. What, after all, was he asking of her? That was the question which he tried energetically to stifle.

He went downstairs hoping, and yet almost fearing, a letter from her. There, sure enough, it lay. He opened it with feverish haste.

It began abruptly with no word of address.

"Ah, what must you think of me? But I could not let you go away without hearing you say you loved me. I wanted you so much to love me. Ah, I love you so!

"I cannot look back, and it makes me tremble to look

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forward. I can only say to myself he loves me. All the world is so different to me now. The moment you took my hand in yours, I knew that whatever you asked I could never say no to you. Only I ask this of you because you love me. Do not ask me for any more.

"I am so wretched now, and so uncertain. I lived all to-day in a sort of dream ; but it is sweet to think that you are somewhere caring for me and thinking about me a little. If you would only just be my friend. You know you have the power ; will not you be content with that?

"I shall see you again quite soon ; it seems so long since I saw you. You will make me glad to go back to Stonedale. Oh, if we could only get to London, and away from that horrid place.

"Write to me, my dearest friend.—Am I not truly yours?

"E. E."

If there be in this world one complete and archetypal representative of gratified vanity, it is assuredly the young man who has received testimony that he is beloved. That he is loved to the exclusion of others, chosen when others are rejected—even that he is loved where, upon the whole, strong reasons forbid him to be loved —are apt only to stimulate this primordial egoism. This vanity, as it is capable of the most exquisite indulgence, feels also the keenest mortification ; a touch upon it may change the whole energies of a nature for good or bad. Had Mrs Eyrton

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written that what had passed was a folly and must be forgotten, undoubtedly the imperious male instinct of subjugation would have revolted, and Gerald would have neglected no means, fair or foul, to prove to the uttermost his power over her. But she had appealed to him; she had thrown herself on his chivalry. "As you are strong be merciful," she had said. She had not gone back upon her pledges; she had only entreated him not to claim their fulfilment. And because Gerald was very honestly in love, his love felt its supreme gratification in self-sacrifice. Nothing is so sweet in love as to give; and Gerald had the pleasure of granting, while what he gave was really to surrender all that had been inconsonant with the harmony in his mind. He walked out on the terrace in the beautiful summer morning to read and re-read her letter. The world was bright for him, dew was fresh on the grass, and the birds sang. It was a changed world from yesterday's.

He went in and wrote her a brief line.

"Sois mon ame
Et ma foi
Sois ma dame
Et ma loi,"

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he wrote in the song's passionate words

"You shall be a law to yourself and to me, and I am, yours, G. N."

He breakfasted with a light heart and a high appetite, then set out for the town, taking a path along the river, and his heart sang to the tune of its swift courses. All was right with the world now. Conscience had no hold on him. He had not beguiled the affections of Eyrton's wife; rather, Eyrton had alienated, estranged, and violently flung them away. Such love as theirs, he thought, even gods might be proud of; and in the vigour of his youth and the sublime vanity of his manhood he drank deep of the pride of life. To have power over her, and not to use it to her hurt—surely that was joy enough and to spare.

The work that he had to do was no longer distasteful to him. She wanted her husband to get into Parliament. If by any help of his he could accomplish it, it should be accomplished.

On reaching the works he went through Eyrton's correspondence. Among it he was surprised to find a note from Miss Smithers,

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who had also been given a holiday. It bore the London postmark, but no address, and announced in the briefest possible way that she was under the necessity of resigning her employment. Gerald felt himself much fortified by this missive, and sent immediately for Mr Bonsor, who was one of the minor clerks. From what Mrs Eyrton had told him, he was sure that he could account for Miss Smithers' action.

Mr Bonsor entered, a tall, knock-kneed person, in whose countenance impudence was tempered by physical timidity.

"Sit down, Mr Bonsor," said Gerald, himself standing. Mr Bonsor obeyed, and Gerald looked sternly down upon him from all his inches.

"Mr Bonsor," said Gerald, "you will have noticed a leading article in this morning's *Leader*. You read the papers, I know."

Mr Bonsor intimated that this was the case.

"Mr Eyrton telegraphs to me that it is his intention to contest Stonedale in the Liberal interest," said Gerald, "and the paper mentions him as a very fit candidate. I am acting for him under general instructions. But there is particular instruction in regard to you, Mr Bonsor."

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"Indeed," said Mr Bonsor, somewhat insolently.

"Yes," said Gerald. "Mr Eyrton does not concern himself with the political opinions of his workmen or employees. He will certainly be grateful for services in a proper way. But in case any one in his service were to oppose him on grounds of personal spite, Mr Bonsor, he would undoubtedly consider that unfair dealing."

"Ho!" said Mr Bonsor contemptuously, "he knows I can show him up."

"I should rid my mind of that idea, Mr Bonsor. You may certainly throw mud at him, and I don't say that none of it will stick. You may even injure his chance of election—though, candidly, I don't believe you can do much harm. But I wish you to be warned that if any ugly personal scandal is started, Mr Eyrton will attribute it to you, and will deal with you accordingly."

Mr Bonsor fidgeted in his chair. "Why must I be blamed for it?" he said. "The thing's common talk."

"What thing?" said Gerald.

"About him and Miss Smithers," said Bonsor.

"Well," said Gerald, "people always talk: I never heard any proof in the matter. But I don't

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see what you have to go on in face of that," and he handed him the note in which Miss Smithers announced her intention of retiring from her employment in the view of "bettering herself in London," and ended by thanking Mr Eyrton for "his many kindnesses."

Gerald watched Mr Bonsor's face.

"I see you are surprised," he said; "so, no doubt, will Mr Eyrton be. But that letter, you see, is written before there was any question of this vacancy. So I do not see how you could corroborate your story: and Mr Eyrton would be happy to institute a criminal action for libel. I need hardly observe," he continued, boldly assuming the offensive, "that what you have said to me to-day would bring the charge nearer to you."

Mr Bonsor turned very red.

"I suppose I may have my own opinions," he said.

"Certainly," said Gerald; "but if they are prejudicial to your neighbour's character, it is safer not to express them. On the other hand," he added, "I daresay that Mr Eyrton may wish to compose old differences by recommending you for suitable preferment. Good-day, Mr Bonsor.

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I shall no doubt see you presently with the rest of the Committee."

Mr Bonsor went, and Gerald puffed out a deep breath in angry disgust.

"Sweet work!" he said. "However, Mr Bonsor is all right, I think." Then he fell to reflecting upon the singular opportuneness of Miss Smithers' disappearance. To attribute it to Mrs Eyrton was not only the simplest, but the pleasantest thing to do. It adorned his ideal with another virtue.

"Only for her I should have had to bribe the beast," he meditated, and thought to himself how fortunate it was that virtue occasionally turned to practical convenience.

He had made an appointment with the Union Committee for two o'clock by permission of Mr Dobson. Gerald knew all of them personally, as he had seen a good deal of them when the details of the sliding scale were under discussion; and they had met in angry conference over the late strike. He had not concealed his opinion of their conduct, but Midland folk are accustomed to give and take hard words. And Gerald possessed a quality which endeared him to nineteen men out

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of every twenty in that particular district: he was an admirable cricketer and football player. Moreover, in the late encounter, the men had been decidedly the winners; so they met him with feelings decidedly friendlier than his were to them.

"Look here, gentlemen," he said, "you all know Mr Eyrton wants to be member for the Stonedale Division. Well, he'll stand right enough; but there's no doubt you Union people could do a great deal to keep him out. Now, what I want to ask you is this. Supposing Sir Reuben had died three months ago, before there was any talk of lowering the wages, is there a man in Stonedale that would have voted for any Liberal rather than for Eyrton? I ask you, Mr Grimthorpe," he said, turning to the Secretary of the Union.

"That's true enough, Mr North," he said, "not one to my knowledge."

"Very well," said Gerald, "what has happened since? This strike. Now, you know very well what I thought about that. Maybe you were right to drive the hardest bargain you could. But you know right well that it was Mr Eyrton who had a right to complain of you, and not you who could

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complain of him. You went back on your bargain with him and the firm."

"Let bygones be bygones, Mr North," said Grimthorpe, "we're all friends now."

"Let them be," said Gerald. "But will they be bygones if you vote against Mr Eyrton because you did him an injury? I'm not asking about your politics. All I ask is that you won't, as a Union, set yourselves against Mr Eyrton, and say he is an enemy of unions."

The men hummed and hawed, and asked for time to consider.

"There's no time like the present," said Gerald. "Take two hours now. That should be enough to make up your minds in to do the straight thing."

Mr Grimthorpe laughed indulgently; but Gerald was vastly happier when, at the expiration of the time, he received an assurance from the deputation that the Union would leave its members free to vote according to their political consciences.

He telegraphed at once a reassuring message to Eyrton, and wrote a full account of his campaign; then, feeling that he had done a good day's work, he retired to Foxholme and lost himself in roseate meditations of the felicity which had appointed

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him to be the protector and confidant of a beautiful and loving woman. Never before had he felt of at all such consequence in the world; and he contemplated his image in the mental mirror as seen beside hers with ever increasing satisfaction. His conduct he felt was not precisely moral—dull word. It was heroic, and heroism is above morals.

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CHAPTER XV

THANKS to Gerald's successful manœuvres, strong local support was assured to Eyrton, and his own influence at the Liberal headquarters obtained him the fullest official recognition. Nevertheless, in the hope of profiting by his recent breach with the Labour party, the Conservatives decided to run a candidate, and a contest accordingly took place, though the result was never doubtful. Votes were wanted in the House, so the Election was fixed for the earliest date possible. Eyrton, of course, came over at once, and Mrs Eyrton joined him. But they filled the house with guests and political supporters. Gerald was turned out, not unwillingly, to quarter himself in the hotel.

Nothing was said between him and Mrs Eyrton; a single pressure of hands at meetings was the only sign of what had passed. It was enough to fill Gerald's heart with delight for an evening.

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For the next fortnight the whole party lived in a whirl. Gerald worked as if his life depended on it —working a good deal to avoid his own thoughts. A brief word with Mrs Eyrton now and then—the tone of her voice when she asked him to do something for her—was all he had to live upon. And then he began to realise that love is a hard master. He took his compact in deadly seriousness. Not for the world, he thought, would he show a sign of discontent; that would be disloyalty. The result was that his manner grew moody and strained; he was exceedingly cross, and it did not mend matters when Mrs Eyrton told him so.

However, all things have an end. The polling-day came, Eyrton was returned by a triumphant majority, there was a final speech-making, and the guests departed from Foxholme.

Gerald was busy over some correspondence next day, when a note came to him from Mrs Eyrton.

"DEAR MR NORTH,—I am so doleful. It is the reaction. Do come this afternoon and cheer me up.—Yours sincerely, EVELYN EYRTON."

Gerald rejoiced exceedingly. He counted the hours and the minutes till he might go and sit

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in the light of her smiles, and under the soft spell of her voice. Eyrton had gone off to a political meeting in his full-blown honours of member elect. He would have her all to himself. He thought that he would try and explain to her how hard things had been. And she would be grateful to him. That was all he wanted.

He came up at four. Two or three callers were there with congratulations, and he helped to entertain them. Then he and she wandered about in the garden, talking over the electioneering. She added her tribute to his usefulness. Eyrton, indeed, had been full of gratitude. Gerald was quite pleased and happy about it all.

Wandering about from place to place, petting Mrs Eyrton's mare in the stables, going down to the river, then toiling again up the terrace, they talked freely and unconstrainedly. She kept him to dinner. Eyrton would not be back till ten o'clock, and Gerald was to stay and hear tidings of the reception given him.

But when they came into the drawing-room after dinner, silences began to fall between them. The struggle began in him.

There she was, so beautiful, so fit to be loved.

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He had only to stretch out his arms. He reasoned with himself, he kept repeating to himself all the oaths he had sworn to himself; but every time they were dimmer and dimmer in his mind. But the struggle showed in his manner; he answered her with his lips, his thoughts were busy in him.

"Why are you so cross?" she said. "I don't like you when you are like that."

So it began.

Matters were not equal between them. Love, if there be any honesty in it, is made up of self-sacrifice in some form or other. She, with her woman's instinct, saw nothing to gratify her in being the protected. The best thing her passion could see, its natural instinct, was to give; and she was willing to give herself unreservedly. It is the woman who gives, the man who takes: that fact is present in every human consciousness. He, the protector, was conscious of falling below his ideal—of doing wrong, in short. She, in the moment's blindness, simply was not. It is easier to question an instinct which says "Take," than a whisper which says "Give, be good to him."

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And after the brief intoxication of kisses it was in him that the questionings awoke. He held her in his arms; passion was silent, satisfied for the moment in the certitude of its mastery.

He was sitting at her feet, his head leaning against her knees; her arms were about him, her hair, and her breath caressed him as she bent over him.

"Why did you bring me here?" he said, in that tone of reproach that is a caress.

"Why did you kiss me?" she answered.

"You made me."

She laughed; a soft, maddening laugh. "Are you very angry?" she said, bending closer over him.

But in a moment he drew away from her a little.

"I wish," he said, "I wish—I wish you had not."

So began the questioning. Then came tears, protestation, her reproaches, his passionate excuses. Then he went away feeling like a thief, and afraid to meet Eyrton.

As he walked back down by the river path,

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he could not but contrast the thoughts in his heart with the joy that had been there when he walked this same path that other morning with her letter in his breast. He was disgraced in his own eyes. The wise world was right after all. One more Platonic friendship had gone to its account. He had gone back on his word. She had trusted him, and he had failed her; for he was honest enough with himself in his despair. Instantly he saw that there was one thing, and only one honourable thing, for him to do. He might stay and be her lover dishonestly, or he might be her friend honestly, and go away. That was plain to him as the moon over his head. But to know is one thing, and to resolve is another.

All the sweetness of her came back upon him with an intensity of realisation that was like pain. He swore to himself that he could not give it up. All through the night he tossed between two resolutions; and when he went to sleep his mind was made up for the plunder. He would have the price of his soul in full, and there should be an end of scruples.

But with the morning, life looked different to him. He took out her treasured letter, and read

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it again and again. Having loved her for honour, should he love her now for dishonour?

He determined to end the matter in a way that should be final. His course lay clear before him. The one thing which seemed intolerable at the moment was further hesitation.

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CHAPTER XVI

GERALD went round to the office and waited Eyrton's coming. The minutes seemed endless; but at last Eyrton came, radiant.

"You ought to have come with me, North; we had a splendid meeting."

"Sorry I didn't," said Gerald. "I wish you joy."

Eyrton looked at him.

"You're a shocking wreck," he said. "You must go off for a holiday. You've overworked yourself these last weeks. I must say, North, you have laid me under the greatest possible obligations."

"I'm glad to hear it," replied Gerald abruptly; "then I can consider that we're quits."

"On the contrary," said Eyrton, "I'm your debtor."

"I don't think so," said Gerald, "but anyhow, that simplifies matters. "Look here," he said

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getting up, "you've got your seat now. This is the best time for me to change. The truth is, I want to be my own master."

"But, my dear North," said Eyrton, "now is just the time when I may be able to repay your services. Frankly, I think you would be wise to stay."

"You're very kind," said Gerald, "but I want a change."

"Go and take a holiday, then."

"It isn't that. I am tired of this work. I've wire-pulled for you to the best of my abilities, and the truth is, I don't much like wire-pulling."

"Well, but," said Eyrton, "excuse my impertinence, but what do you mean to do? It would surely be a mistake to go back to the bar. Of course any interest I may have would be at your service, but it's worth nothing."

"It's very good of you," said Gerald, "but I shouldn't think of that. I've got a cousin stock-farming out in the North-west, I think I'll go and join him."

"Really, my dear fellow," said Eyrton, "I can't let you throw yourself away like this. Canada, of all places!"

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"Look here," said Gerald, whose nerves were scarcely under command, and who wanted an end of the scene, "you were good enough to say just now that I had been of some use to you. Well, I did my best. But can't you see that there are things which a man is not particularly keen on doing. I don't want to make a fuss; that's why I go when we can part friends."

Eyrton flushed a good deal.

"I hadn't suspected you of such Puritanism," he said, "but I take it now, that you were at the bottom of this singular disappearance of Miss Smithers."

"Not at all," said Gerald, "you credit me with too much usefulness. I may tell you one thing, however, that I think you had better know. Miss Smithers went to see Mrs Eyrton the day we had that scene with de Cerjat."

"Indeed," said Eyrton; "and you infer——"

"I leave you to draw your own inferences," said Gerald. "Don't let us quarrel," he said. "I thought you had better know that. I should not have mentioned it, of course, but that I am going away. You can spare me conveniently now, can't you?"

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"As you like," said Eyrton.

"Good-bye, then," said Gerald, and stretched out his hand.

"Good-bye," said Eyrton.

As Gerald was going away, Eyrton called him.

"North."

Gerald came back.

"I'm obliged to you for mentioning that," said Eyrton stiffly. "It explains a good many things. Look here, North," he went on, "remember that if you want any help at any time I owe you services."

"Thank you," said Gerald; "I wish you every success in the House. Now," he added, "I will just go up and say good-bye to Mrs Eyrton. I should like to get away at once; as you say, I want a slack time. Good-bye, then."

He went out of the office and through the works with a curious sinking of the heart. His place was to know him no more. He had become a good deal wedded to his work in Stonedale, where he had been given, on the whole, a very free hand to try his theories. But these were lesser afflictions.

His feet were heavy as he walked up the hill

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to Foxholme. It was still early in the day. Autumn had scarcely browned a leaf since he drove de Cerjat away that day, which had been to him the beginning of folly.

He was half afraid to meet her. What would she say?

She was in her morning-room when he was shown in. Her face was very white, and her eyes were big and swollen. She did not get up out of her chair when the servant announced him.

"Oh, how do you do!" she said in a hard, high, mechanical voice.

Gerald walked back, and made sure that the door was closed.

"Why do you come here?" she said, still leaning back in her chair, and avoiding his eyes. "You made me so unhappy last night. I never slept at all. I am so miserable, I do not know what to do with myself. What do you want?"

Gerald was standing facing her.

"I have come to say good-bye," he said in a voice that he could scarcely control.

"What do you mean?" she said suddenly, almost angrily.

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"I mean that I am going away," he said, still thickly and huskily.

"Oh!" she said bitterly, "you are going away. Good-bye. I hope you will have a pleasant holiday. Will you get salmon-fishing?"

He controlled himself the best way he could.

"Listen, Evelyn. I am not going for a holiday, I am going away altogether—to Canada, I think —somewhere far off, anyhow."

She turned round towards him, and gazed at him with eyes that did not seem to understand what he said.

"To Canada?" she repeated mechanically.

"Yes," he said, "to Canada."

"I don't understand," she said; "sit down," and she pointed imperiously to a chair.

He sat down feeling as if his soul had got outside his body, and was trying to pull the body after it. He could not look at her. He sat bent forward with his elbows on his knees and his eyes hidden in his hands.

"Yes," he said, "I am going away. It must be either one thing or the other. And it must not be the other. I love you too much—or not well enough—to stay here. So I must go away.

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I have seen your husband, and settled it with him. I have come here to say good-bye."

He got up, and held out his hand.

"Good-bye," she repeated automatically.

He pressed his lips to her hand, then he let it go and walked towards the door. His feet were heavier than lead. Then he stopped by a table, and picked up a book on it and opened it. He could not go on. Still she made no sign.

He turned and looked at her.

She was lying, rather than sitting, in the chair, dead white, in a prostrate heap. He went across the room to her, with the same heavy dragging steps. He took her hands and knelt down before her.

"Evelyn, Evelyn, my love, forgive me all the harm I have done you."

She threw her arms about him, and drew him convulsively to her.

"You must not go away. Stay—I want you."

"I must! I must!" he said. "Listen, dear. You will go away from here to London. You will have lots of things to do and people to see, and you won't be bored or lonely. Only I could not bear to be with you. My dear, I would do

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anything in the world for you, and all I can do is to go away. Believe me, it is the hardest of all."

She was sobbing bitterly now, too bitterly to answer him.

"Will you write to me," he said, "when I go out there to Canada—will you, Evelyn?"

"I will," she sobbed.

"Write and tell me all you are doing. You will be so beautiful, and you will go everywhere. Only don't write to me about things that are past. I could not bear it out there," he said.

She had no words to answer with.

"Good-bye now, Evelyn," he said, "good-bye. Some day, when we are old and wise, I will come back, and you will thank me then. I don't want you to thank me now. Good-bye."

He lifted her arms very gently from about his neck, and very gently he drew away his own from her. Then he kissed her on the forehead, among the tendrils of her hair, and hurried out of the room without looking back.

He had done what he took to be right, but he had no certainty, no exultation. Life was bitter to him. He had done the one thing he

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could to bring about a reconciliation with her husband, yet from that he had little hope. All the comfort he had to go out into the world with was a tremulous note sent down to him before he left.

"Good-bye. E. E."

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CHAPTER XVII

"'FLOWER o' the quince, flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?'"

"For God's sake, Gerald, let us hear something else. If the thing even had a tune to it, I could bear it. But you go round droning, 'Flower o' the quince, flower o' the quince,' like an infernal cockchafer, from morning to night."

The men were sitting on the verandah smoking in the shade. It was May in Canada.

Gerald relapsed into silence, and looked out vacantly over the blossoming waste of prairie. Frank Johnson was industriously spelling over a three weeks' old London paper.

"I say, Gerald," he began again, "your friend Eyrton seems to be making his way. Listen here: 'The member for Stonedale only entered the House late in last session, but in this short time he has acquired a reputation which

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is even more considerable in the House than outside it, and his speech of Tuesday last has done much to heighten it.' Damn it! Gerald, what a fool you were to quarrel with him and come out to this place!"

"I have often made the same reflection," retorted Gerald, "and your conversation confirms me in it."

"Don't be nasty-tempered! Look here, there's more of it. 'Mr Eyrton is enviable in all ways; it is well known that Mr de Cerjat's magnificent "Portrait of a Lady," which has won such notice in this year's Academy, is a portrait of Mrs Eyrton.'"

"Look here, Frank," said Gerald, getting up, "the most intolerable thing that a man can do is to read extracts from a stale newspaper to an audience which desires to be let alone." He walked away, knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

"Poor old chap!" murmured the placid Frank, "I think he's a bit dotty at times," and he placidly resumed his newspaper.

Gerald wandered out into the open, and looked mechanically towards the cattle to see that they were all right. He had read the paragraph in

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the paper three days before, when it came into the house. Frank, who was not a rapid devourer of print, had spent the interval consuming his weekly joy of *Tit Bits*.

It had been a bitter pill to Gerald, this same paragraph. In the August before he had gone on the steamer, still palpitating with an admiration of his own virtue. He wrote long letters to Mrs Eyrton on the way out, full of high moral counsel, and it filled him with satisfaction to find himself, at six-and-twenty, a leader of the blind, a keeper of souls, with power on his own account to bind or to loose in the moral order. He wrote long journals to her describing his early experiences, which interested him by their novelty, and kept his mind working.

She wrote to him too, according to their covenant, saying no word of the past, but describing their settling in London, Eyrton's parliamentary life, the search for suitable quarters.

However, Gerald settled down in the ranch, and the novelty soon wore off his impressions. Frank was a good chap, as Gerald knew, but he had never realised before how uninteresting Frank's society could be. The two stockmen did not add much

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to the enlivenment. The great calm and peace of the boundless prairies which he had looked forward to settled down on his spirits like a wet blanket. He discovered that there were horses to ride certainly, but that Canadian horses, which have their heavy day's work to do, are very different creatures from the spirited animals which had taken him across country, or galloped over commons in Stonedale, while a pretty woman rode by his side. The chief incidents and emotions in life appeared to connect themselves with cows calving. Nor had Gerald any natural taste for cookery. In short, he was as completely bored as a young man can be who is living in the open, with the enjoyment of perfect health. As to the future, there was no uncertainty about that. The stockmen told him if he was thinking of taking a ranch in Canada, that he should wire for his best friend to put him in an asylum. Frank admitted that if Gerald had ten thousand pounds, and was lucky, he might make five per cent. on the investment; but Gerald had not ten thousand ponnds.

"What a fool you were to quarrel with Eyrton," was the burden of Frank's comment from week end to week end; only the accompanying

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adjectives varied according to the choice of the moment. Nor did Gerald feel disposed to explain to Frank the high, pure motives which had induced him to take charge of the soul of his friend's wife. As for the pleasure of self-sacrifice, and the rest, these finer shades of emotion seemed a little impalpable out in the log hut. It rather distressed him that his companions all regarded him as a person of exceptional and unaccountable—but not heroic—virtues.

All this was in the beginning—in the first three weeks or so. Gerald had written off his impressions, and nobly tried to conceal his regrets. Then came a letter from Stonedale. Mrs Eyrton had returned; she was glad to hear he was having such a good time. She herself was having a lot of people down from London; they were going to be very gay, and it would be such a bore. She quite envied him his prairie life.

Gerald sat down to write one evening in his room. His heart was hot within him. All the day long he had given the rein to memory; he had felt warm arms about him, he remembered the clasp of her hand. Now it was all over and done with. If he still lived within sight of

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her, if he saw her once a week, once a month, if he were in England even, he could solace himself with the thought of his power. He would be lord and master of all the treasures that he had now thrown away—and for what? What was the use of it? He bitterly repented his virtue; and as for her, if she did not repent of hers, he would bitterly desire to make her. At least he must assure himself that he had really made a sacrifice, and she should feel his lordship over her. He sat down and poured out his heart in passionate words; all the fever of sensation, the mere physical longing, the forbidden sweetness, all were there, and he thought of her trembling as she read it. He knew it would be sweet to her to read, and he would not deny himself the pleasure of pleasing her.

So the letter was written. But in Canada, between the writing of a letter and the nearest post-office there is time for repentance; and of this also Gerald repented. At least he thought to himself he would not undo his own work for the sake of so shadowy a pleasure. Other letters he wrote in answer to Mrs Eyrton's, but they also were unsent; and the end of it was that he wrote

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no more to her. But in the lonely plain he lived perpetually with the image of his old love. There were no other women to put it out of his mind, yet the open-air life had its healthful effect on him, and hard work in the Canadian winter leaves a man little mind for love-making.

Passion in such a life was not imperious. He could not trust himself to write to her, but he conceived of her as still under his influence—still grateful for his moral support. He was determined not to shatter the image—the ideal image of himself—which subsisted in her mind. That she might be capable of criticising his conduct and deciding against him—that there might exist in a woman fierce spasms of resentment, angry reluctance against the code which he had imposed upon her, never entered his mind. Neither did he realise that dreams last longer in solitude than in society; and when her letters ceased as his did, he attributed it neither to pique nor to forgetfulness, but to a gentle desire to spare his feelings. She had divined the conflict in his soul, and offered him the only possible help—her silence. And so, perhaps, had he been happily occupied, the dream might

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have faded away, growing always dimmer and more beautiful. But he was not.

Spring came out of its prison-house and set the birds pairing, but it did nothing to reconcile Gerald to the tedium of existence. Work is a good anodyne, but feeding pigs does not fill the mind with reflection; Gerald tired of discussing prices, and sunshine gave him only a means of lounging in solitude. The weekly papers were his torment and his delight; they told him of all the things he cared for and that he had cut himself adrift from. London was still London, but London had no place for him. He could not go back to the endless expectation of briefs; and where he was, life held out no promise. It seemed to him a choice between remaining on as a farm-hand or turning waiter in the first hotel that would employ him; at best, an enlistment in the Mounted Police.

Whereas in London things were going their old way; Eyrton was making his mark, and Eyrton was not the man to forget those who helped him. Gerald did him that justice, though he followed his successes with jealous eyes.

"And to think," he said to himself, "that, if I had not been a prig——"

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For, after all, he continued, flirtations were no new thing in the world. Since the world was, all has been permitted in love. Then he would fall to remembering the sweetness; and from contrasting it day after day with his present lot, a tide of bitterness swept in upon him till it poisoned even his thoughts of her. If he so bitterly repented his hasty resolution—the impulse of a moment—was it to be supposed that she could still take it seriously. Perhaps she talked over it now—perhaps laughed over it—with whom? Then would arise a great struggle between the instincts which had prompted him to leave her and the instincts which now revenged themselves. But upon the whole the didactic voice in him still held up its side in the argument, though hard pressed at times.

It was in some such frame of mind that he met the paragraph about her; and instantly it wakened in him all the old jealousies, the desire of monopoly. There she was in the whirl of London, admired, courted, even sitting to de Cerjat. For want of a definite image to torture himself with he took that one. How on earth could Eyrton have allowed it? That was the end of virtue like his—virtue? He was the poor

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fool that did a wrong thing, that threw away his honour, and deceived the man who had helped him. As for Eyrton, that was no great matter. Gerald had helped him in return, had bribed and intrigued for him, then he had gone away, and the count was clear between them—but for her: he had been the first to break down her scruples, to take her past the first step on the primrose path. Once the limit was crossed, even in intention, what was there in store for a woman who did not love her husband and who knew him to be false? Poor, miserable fool, he had done the wrong, and had not taken the good with the evil: he had pitiably faltered.

He set his teeth on a curse and shook his head.

"The *Cattivo Coro*," he muttered; "that is the company I shall keep. '*Cacciarli i ciel per non esser men belli?*' Heaven and Hell shut their door on the likes of me. If it were only to do again—I would win Hell anyhow, and take a man's delight in completeness. Repentance! if there were only room for repentance—mine would be sincere enough, and bear fruit for perdition."

He got up and shook himself. "Let us go and fulfil our function in the world," he said aloud, "let us feed pigs."

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As he strolled back toward the shed he saw one of the men coming back with the cart from Calgary. "More bad butter and more papers," he reflected. "I will read no more of them."

It was his weekly resolution. As he was feeding the pigs Frank came out to him with a letter.

"Hallo, Gerald, here's a letter for you from the House of Commons. I suppose it's from Eyrton."

Inwardly cursing Frank's impertinence, Gerald took the letter and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Don't you mean to read it," said the artless Frank. "What a secretive beggar you are. There, take it away and I'll finish this job for you."

The display of tactless good-nature staved off an outburst.

"You silly old fool!" said Gerald, "who can read a letter with his hands all over hog-wash? I'll tell you all about it presently. Very well, then, take on here."

And Gerald strolled towards the house with an affected deliberation. When his door was locked on him he tore the note open.

"DEAR NORTH," it ran, "I don't know whether you find ranching come up to your expectations. If so, you will be the first instance in my experience. But if you are not wedded to your backwoods, there is a proposal you might care to entertain.

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"Old Crawshaw died last month, and I am in treaty to buy out his interest in the firm, which will make me chief owner as you are aware. Dobson, as usual, raises objections, but as usual they will only delay the progress of events. It is, however, one of his main points that my parliamentary duties prevents me from attending as closely as I should otherwise to the business of the firm. This is an objection of which I am bound to admit the weight, since at present the sapient Dobson has really to take some active share in the management. I propose therefore to appoint on our joint behalf a manager. It would certainly facilitate matters if I might mention your name as a suitable person for the employment; you being a *persona grata* with the said Dobson.

"The state of finances would not warrant me in proposing a higher salary than £500, and the work would be heavy. But if you care to apply your favourite sliding-scale arrangement in your own case, I shall be happy to fall in with any equivalent proposal.

"I should be glad of an immediate answer, as things are not in a very satisfactory state at Stonedale at present. Dobson's incompetence is familiar to you, and for political reasons I do not wish at present to be drawn into an active part in labour disputes.

"Please wire your decision at your earliest convenience. My wife joins with me in the hope that you may see your way to accept.—Yours sincerely, JULIAN EYRTON."

Gerald read this and put it down in a dazed way.

"Well, his majesty the Devil is a decenter creature than I thought," he said. "He pays me well. It's offering a bonus on a soul which he has already."

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He walked out to Frank. "Just read that," he said.

Frank had not finished the first page before he dealt Gerald a resounding slap on the back. "By God! you're a lucky beggar; you've got another chance. I congratulate you sincerely, old chap," he said, when he finished. "Shake hands. I'll take the mare and ride in myself with your wire. You're a made man now Gerald. You won't quarrel with your bread and butter again, I'll warrant. Damn it, man," he said, "what do you stand there wrinkling up your nose and sneering at. You ought to be infernally pleased. He doesn't ask you to eat humble pie or anything. I call that a very nice letter. I don't see how any man could make you a better offer."

"No," said Gerald, with a queer laugh, "I don't see how he could. Never mind about the wire, I'll get the train to-morrow and wire myself. I tell you, Frank, it's not such a simple world as you think."

"What the devil has the fellow got up his sleeve now? I have a great mind to go in and send that wire to-night for fear you would alter

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your mind before to-morrow. I tell you, man, you're not cut out for a stock farmer. You've got lots of brains; go in now and win, and don't let any ridiculous high falutin stand in your way."

"That's just about the size of it," said Gerald, and he chewed at his moustache. Then he turned round sharply to his cousin. "Look here, Frank, you're a decent, straight sort of fellow; I wonder if you'd think it high-falutin nonsense. I'll tell you just the whole truth. This man Eyrton took me on as secretary when I was doing no good at the bar. Very well, after a bit I fell in love with his wife. I made love to her; and—well—she liked me. Things happened queerly. It was just the toss of a penny that we didn't go the whole way. Only a question of opportunity. Anyhow we didn't, but that couldn't have lasted. I thought it wasn't a straight sort of thing to do, so I came away—and damned sorry I've been ever since. Now he wants me to go back. What do you say now?—but I'm going anyway."

Frank looked at him. First he whistled, and then he laughed out a great jolly laugh.

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"Well, I am damned! It was a deuced straight thing of you to do, dear boy. But what the devil did you go spooning your employer's wife for? Aren't there lots of women in the world? Now I'll tell you what. Just you go and settle down and marry a nice girl. You'll be able to do it right enough with that money. And as for this Mrs Eyrton, why, man alive, that's a year ago. You don't suppose she'll be breaking her heart for you still. Anyway, she's got a good position in the world now, and you may bet your boots she is not going to be fool enough to run into the divorce court. But just you take my advice; you get married. Or, if you don't like that—any woman but that one—you needn't go fooling about with married women—that's a fool's trick. Dash it, man, you're older now, and you'll find you have a lot more sense than when you came out. A man doesn't make a fool of himself twice."

Gerald listened to this dissertation with some amusement.

"Frank," he said, at last, "you have no æsthetic sense."

"Thank God!" said Frank.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A fortnight later Gerald was landing at Liverpool. A telegram from Eyrton reached him: "Call on me as soon as possible at the House of Commons." Gerald wired for rooms to a cheap hotel, and put himself into the train for London.

In the six hours' journey he had time to review his reflections. They seemed to him to sum themselves in a phrase: "Let things take their course." Never again, he determined, would he act upon abstract principles. His business with life was to make a success of it; the ball was at his feet, and he would take the good that came to him, whatever it might be. He was going now to be a man among men, with his separate rank in the world. As for Eyrton, there was no question of obligation now; if Eyrton asked him to undertake

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this business that was because he had need of him.

"I see his game plain enough," he meditated; "the men can bully Dobson with threats of a strike. Eyrton knows I won't let myself be bullied, and he reserves for himself the *rôle* of pacificator. I shall be Cerberus; he will be the benignant Jupiter who comes down and makes concessions, and the newspapers will write leaders about him."

He laughed a little, then looked again at his watch. If he got to the house by four it surely would be permitted for him to go and call on Mrs Eyrton before dinner. Travelling was slow work at fifty miles an hour; all his nature was leaping forward to that meeting. They would say nothing perhaps, though he had arranged for many touching speeches. "Why did you not write to me?" "Because I could only write folly." But whatever was said between them, he would read the past in her eyes—perhaps, too, a glimmer of the future.

As for that future—it should decide itself. Only it would be sweet to see her again; and he at all events was done with scruples.

He went straight from his hotel to the House, and waited weary minutes for Eyrton to come

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out. He came at last, frock-coated and business-like, with an air of conscious superiority. His greeting was warm; though his hard, high-pitched voice did not lend itself to geniality, Gerald noted in him that increased benignity which is born of success. He asked after Canadian experiences.

"Not much to tell," said Gerald, "I prefer this side. Life is more varied. And, I take it, you also find London a pleasant change after Stonedale. You are quite a personage here now to judge from the papers."

"Oh, thanks," said Eyrton; "you are too good. The papers, of course, don't count for much—except as straws to show you the wind. Still I think I have every reason to be satisfied."

They had turned into one of the side lobbies, and were pacing up and down.

"And Mrs Eyrton," said Gerald, "she must be having a good time? How is she?"

"Quite well, thanks, but she found this heat overpowering. You won't see her just at present though; she has gone down to Stonedale for country air."

Gerald's heart had nearly stopped beating; it throbbed desperately at his first mention of her

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name, and he could scarcely control his voice. She had gone down to Stonedale. He would meet her there—and meet her alone. He would meet her in the room where they had parted. What could this mean—but one thing?

He felt himself turn white.

"It will be only a pleasure deferred," he said with as much steadiness as he could command; "and, by the way, when do you want me to go down there?"

"Well, not just yet," said Eyrton. "The fact is, these arrangements are not complete. It would not be a diplomatic moment to bring you in. You see that ass, Dobson, has got things into such a mess that I must really disentangle it myself."

"I gathered," said Gerald, "that things were not going quite smoothly. Is the sliding-scale arrangement still in question?"

"It is and it is not. The men still understand it perfectly when there is a rise; but their intelligence fails when we talk of reductions. The fact is, North, you can't dispense with the personal equation. Most things are a matter of tact, and tact, as I need hardly tell you, is not Dobson's most conspicuous quality. That, indeed, is why I

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am anxious to get you there; but I must get this matter settled first."

"On what do you propose to settle it?"

"Well, it just comes to this. Competition has increased, you see; we are no longer alone in the market, and we can't pay fancy prices for labour. On the other hand, we are the oldest established people in this industry, and we have our connection. For that reason we can't afford a strike. As a matter of fact, I should be glad to withdraw from the whole business with what I have realised—to sell out absolutely; in fact I have no taste for mercantile speculation *per se*. But when you have created a great industry—as I claim to have done in a considerable measure—you desire to maintain your connection with it."

"I take it," said Gerald, "that connection does you no harm here."

"That, no doubt, is a factor in my consideration. At all events, it is pretty well settled that we shall turn ourselves into a limited liability company. Dobson, I believe, will retain as much interest as at present; and I shall receive as many shares as are necessary to give me a strong position. You will be appointed before the transfer; and also

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before that I shall make an agreement with the men, which will modify the sliding scale by fixing a minimum wage."

"I begin to see," said Gerald. "You will liberate a certain part of your fortune and put it, let us say, into the stocks. You will retain your position at the head of the firm, and no doubt that will do just as well for the Parliamentary credit. But where will you be if profits drop till you cannot afford the minimum wage?"

"The chance is remote," said Eyrton; "but in that case I have no doubt that the company would be obliged to close the works—unless the men voluntarily rescind the agreement. Life, my dear fellow, is largely made possible by compromises. But I don't think you need have any apprehensions."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Gerald; "it is merely the principle of the thing that seems unreasonable."

"Ah!" said Eyrton, "principles are like the conventions at whist—the real player is your man who knows when to depart from them."

"Moral principles," asked Gerald.

"Moral principles," retorted Eyrton, "are like

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razors. A gentleman uses them to keep himself respectable. Fools use themselves to cut their own throats. Am I to be virtuous—if it is virtuous to bring on a strike—in order that other people may have cakes and ale? *In nos legem sancimus iniquam.*"

"That is quite pretty," said Gerald; "but you are wasting epigrams, as far as the logic of it goes. A winter in Canada convinced me of common sense. I am quite content to take the world on its own terms."

"That is all right," said Eyrton; "but now, if you will excuse me, I must be getting back to my place. I shall go to Stonedale next week; I will lay down principles, and Dobson shall do the compromising; he is a good man to haggle about the minimum. So I think for about six weeks we shan't want you."

"Very well," said Gerald, "in that case I will go home and see my people before I take on. You will let me know when you want me. Good-bye."

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CHAPTER XIX

GERALD wandered out into St James Park. "*In nos legem sancimus iniquam*," he repeated—"'We lay down the law to our own hurt.' A Daniel come to judgment. Eyrton expounds an admirable philosophy to me; I will not cut my throat any more, your worship."

"Eyrton has played his cards well," he reflected. "Say he is worth £100,000 now. I daresay he is. He clears out with fifty thousand. The other fifty are his political stakes. If the Company thrives, well and good; if it goes under, he drops his money amid universal sympathy for the model employer, and he still has a very decent competence, and by that time he will really be somebody in the House. After all, it is quite fair; he keeps himself as clean-shaven as a man need—I don't need to sit in judgment on his morals; I am not young enough for that nowadays."

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Six weeks, he reflected. Six weeks seemed a long time. He must write to her. Maybe she would propose his coming down—as a guest. He sat down on the bench looking over the water, and began to shape phrases of a letter when a voice hailed him.

"Is this North? And why has our virtuous private secretary returned from his virgin wilderness? Is he weary of virginity?"

There was de Cerjat, radiant in his apparel, with a grey frock-coat, faultless in its lines, a hat that shone like the sun in the heavens, patent leathers of the last correctness, yet an artistic atmosphere diffused itself over the whole costume, from a bunchy and exuberant necktie.

Gerald laughed.

"Wildernesses are over-rated things. Sit down here and talk to me. You don't look much like the backwoods."

De Cerjat sat down on the bench beside him.

"And has your saintship elected London to be the abode of your sanctity? Are you going to parade your virtues in Piccadilly? What erring prodigal do you now undertake to reform?"

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"Not you, at any rate. All this success will have made you incorrigible."

"Ah, success," said de Cerjat, "*parlez moi de ça;* it is your only recipe for virtue and happiness. Look at me. But you, dear thing, in what sphere do you propose to exercise your virtues?"

Gerald laughed again. "*Ou revient toujours, à ses premières amours.* I am going back to Stonedale to manage the works, and I have repented of any virtues I ever possessed."

De Cerjat looked at him with an air of amused compassion.

"Indeed. You have repented. Ah! the sad history. So you think you are going back to your first love. Listen, and let me tell you a little story."

Gerald bit his lips. He saw he had been indiscreet, but the only thing to do was to bluff it out.

"Go on," he said. "Is it a romance with a revolver in it?"

De Cerjat was unmoved.

"Precisely, dear thing. It begins with the revolver if not earlier. You may remember that I told you so. Do not imagine that I am jealous.

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My poor dear, I am sorry for you. I have made her immortal, and you have made yourself—shall we say—ridiculous? It is too late for repentance, dear friend—you may repent, but the *premières amours* are closed against you."

"If you are not civil," said Gerald, "I will throw you into that water. In the meanwhile, I do not understand a word of what you are saying."

De Cerjat was so obviously bubbling over with delight, like a monkey over some successful mischief, that Gerald was determined to hear, though his heart failed him.

"Do not be impetuous, dear friend. We are talking naturally about our friend, Mrs Eyrton. As for me I regret nothing. It is true there was a disagreeable scene—but that is all forgotten—I am grateful to you for the sketches, which you will remember I had the foolish project of burning. Not that I believe I should have done so. However, after due time, I looked at them, and, behold! they were good, but still sketches. From them I composed that portrait of which you will have heard speak, if indeed you have not seen it."

"Where should I see it?" said Gerald.

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"Why, at Eyrton's house, of course, if you have been there. The lovely original — far less entrancingly beautiful than the lady of my picture, but still lovely—is not in London. You know why? Ah, my poor friend."

"So she did not sit to you after all?" said Gerald hastily.

"'After all.' So you did me the honour to be jealous out there in your virgin wilderness! Ah, Mentor, Mentor—so you were all the time repenting."

"I repent one thing anyhow," said Gerald, "and that is that I interfered with your shooting yourself. Not that I believe you would have done it," he added viciously, "but, anyhow, I might have kicked you; and if you make unwarrantable remarks about friends of mine there is still time."

"Unwarrantable is a hard word, dear thing, and people in London must drop their backwood manners. But if you do not like to hear my story I shall go away."

"Oh, finish your rigmarole," said Gerald.

"Well, this was what happened. At the private view in the Academy, I was there of course, and I may admit that I stayed near my lady's portrait.

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It is always pleasant to hear delighted commentary on one's work. But, particularly, I was anxious to perceive the effect on Mrs Eyrton. However, the first recognition came from her husband, who came up and expressed his approbation to me in very proper terms, which he emphasised by purchase. Then I saw him bring her to look at it. I contrived to meet her directly afterwards, and advanced to receive her gratitude. It was certainly not excessive. 'I was not prepared for this honour,' she said. However, I apologised for the liberty I had taken—it was a pretty irony, was it not, to apologise for making her beautiful for ever. And then we became more friendly. I did you the honour to ask after you."

"The devil you did!" said Gerald.

"To be precise, dear friend, I said: 'And how is our private secretary? He was the most agreeable person (you will pardon my accuracy of quotation) whom I ever knew to be a prig?' I regret to say that Mrs Eyrton looked extremely incensed. She made stupid allusions to bygone occurrences, and ended by a highly dramatic phrase about your virtue. It was quite like the Adelphi.

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"As it was plain that I had offended the fair lady, and as I was indeed a little nettled, I determined to have the last word, because I was in a position to guess now with some accuracy. 'My dear Mrs Eyrton,' I said, 'I am sure that yours is the best testimony in the world to his singular virtue.'"

Gerald got up. "Well," he said, "and then?"

"I hope I shall gratify your vanity. She said: 'Mr North had my friendship. So had you, at one time. But it was just because he was my friend that Mr North went away. You cannot understand that, can you?' This she said to me as an insult, but I confess it appears to me a compliment to my good sense. Then she went away—I must say she looked extremely handsome."

"And you looked a damned fool!" said Gerald.

"Let us be candid, dear youth. After all, one is mortal. I had had other hopes: what woman ought not to have been grateful—to the fullest measure of gratitude—for such a picture? but she was not. And I did look a fool—at least I felt one."

'That was a sign of grace," said Gerald

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"You have not been fool enough to mention this anywhere. No," he continued, "it is not the sort of story you would be likely to tell. I can't see why the devil you told it to me."

"Mixed motives, dear thing. You were once Mentor to me, who am your elder and intellectual superior. It is a certain satisfaction to see Mentor repentant and writhing. Partly also—I confess to an artistic appreciation of these things—if a young man makes a fool of himself, I like to see him do it generously and thoroughly—as you did, dear friend. I did not think you would hear this story elsewhere, and I thought it was due to you."

"Damn you!" said Gerald, with a queer laugh, "do you expect me to be grateful? Have you any more favours?"

De Cerjat regarded him enigmatically and complacently. "The rest you can find out for yourself, but if you like I will tell you."

"Go on," said Gerald, "one can't have too much of your engaging conversation."

"You have doubtless reflected, dear thing, that Mrs Eyrton gave you credit for a virtue which you no longer possessed. You may have thought that you were still in time to be less virtuous. Poor

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dear! I made the same reflection at the time of this interview. Two months later I saw the lady, and it was evident to me why she had such implicit confidence in the future."

"What do you mean?" said Gerald.

"I mean, dear thing, that it had become pretty evident that Mrs Eyrton had been reconciled with her husband, if indeed there was any conjugal estrangement—that is at least the only creditable view of the case."

Gerald still looked at him. His mind was in a maze. Suddenly insight flashed upon him. "The only creditable view of the case."

"You understand, my poor dear, that all the tenderness which a rash young man rejected will soon be squandered on——"

"That will do," said Gerald, "I've had enough."

De Cerjat was not to be put off. His hour had struck.

"Come and dine?"

"Not to-day, thanks. Which way are you going?—because I am going the other."

"Don't be cross," said de Cerjat. "Shall I tell you something? If I were not Alexander I would be Diogenes. If I were not the coming painter, I

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would be the late private secretary. Good-bye, Diogenes."

He got up, adjusted his glossy hat, and marched away; three steps off he turned round.

"Listen, Diogenes, I'll lay five to one she asks you to be godfather!"

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CHAPTER XX

GERALD went back to his hotel in the very gall of bitterness. Young as he was, he had seen enough of woman nature to know that here was a barrier drawn hard and fast against him. Whether such a new element in life would make a lasting change in character, he never debated; he was too young to care for a forecast that reached beyond a twelvemonth. He could scarcely be said to think. All his thoughts, all his plans, all his imaginings, had learnt to have one centre. Now they found themselves out of focus, and he was like a man who has lost the sense of direction. The one thing real to him, mercilessly pressed in upon his mind, was the irony of his position, his grotesque tumble between two stools. Once before he had chosen between his ideals and his inclinations; once before he had followed the primrose path; but then at least he had been master of his

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course so far as to go back upon it. The same choice had been offered him a second time; this decision had been made almost without a struggle for the easy and pleasant way, the primrose path; but once the decision had been made, once he had abandoned his sense of honour and honesty, once he was fairly embarked on the slope, an unforeseen door was shut in his face. Again he had sold his soul and got no money for it.

That was the first sting, the tooth of mortified vanity. But as the hours and days wore on, the mere irrepressible longing for the face and the voice of this woman grew to be an abiding pain. He felt alone in the world and purposeless. Hope and pleasure were gone out of life; nothing was left but sorrowful retrospect, embittered by the sense of what he had thrown away. He heaped derision upon himself, but it did not cure the longing.

London was hateful to him. So, at a moment's impulse, he crossed to Ireland and made a pilgrimage to the glen of heather and bilberries. For hours he lay there trying to realise that the love of past days—the lady of his glen—was now some one utterly put away and done with, changed, transfigured, a different woman, no longer the

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radiant, irresponsible creature who had for a bright hour been his playfellow among the bilberries. And the tear-stained face that had looked so passionately into his—that too was gone; these eyes would have a new light in them, the light of motherhood.

One comfort only remained to him—the story that de Cerjat had told him. The recollection of it made him feel almost kindly to that singular person. So she had still cared enough for him to defend him—in a way so like herself, so frank, so unconventional. That gave some slight check to his anger with his own folly. Though it was a poor and chilly comfort, it gave him some hope that they would meet again on terms of a dear intimacy; and with this hope he tried to solace his pain.

At last he saw in the paper the announcement of a son born to Mrs Eyrton. He wrote formal congratulations and enquiries to Eyrton, and waited with sickening anxiety for the first meeting. He was to go to Stonedale in a week. After all, the woman he loved was there; and what had been could not be blotted out, though it should be as if it never had been.

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Then one morning came a letter in Mrs Eyrton's hand. He tore it open with trembling fingers. The first words struck a chill to his soul. This was the letter.

"DEAR MR NORTH,—I hope you will come and stay with us for a little when you come over, before you get into quarters of your own. I was so surprised and glad to hear you were coming back; it is such ages since we have heard anything of you. You will find things very different now; of course Baby takes up most of my time.

"I hope you have entirely forgotten how ridiculously we both behaved a year ago. It is a positive joy to be able to look at things sanely again. I think you behaved quite nicely, but then it was not very serious as far as you were concerned, was it? Do you know—I blush to confess it—I was very serious indeed? But of course everything is altered now.

"Will you be Baby's godfather. Julian wants it, and I should like it.—Yours very sincerely, EVELYN EYRTON."

Gerald broke into a convulsive spasm of laughter.

"Lord!" he said, "de Cerjat was right after all!"

Then he read the letter over again attentively, turning whiter as he read it. When he had finished, he doubled it across and tore it passionately into little fragments.

"She may well say it," he said; "things are different now."

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That was not the woman he had loved. That was his first cry—what had changed her? Was it London? Was it Eyrton? What had come over her that she, who had dealt generously and gently with her husband's mistress, should turn and stab one who had sacrificed everything for her sake. For the stab was unmistakable—the woman's stab with a brooch pin.

Gradually, as he pondered, it began to dawn upon him that, after all, Mrs Eyrton had not seen him as he saw himself. When he was there, in the full tide of love, she had submitted, as a woman submits, to his domination. And he had not spared her. He had used his power capriciously, tyrannously. She had loved him—he knew that, even if she had not now cast it up to him as a reproach, or rather a taunt, to remind him of all he had thrown away.

And he had set to work to mould her to his own will. How much of his motive had been pure affection? how much an insensate vanity? He had gone away, and been happy with the thought of his own achievement—with the pride of one who wins souls. But for her—what comfort was there? Only now did he guess how in her heart of

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hearts she had judged him—how bitterly she had resented the surrender of her own will; how there had always been a lurking grudge against the rash youth who came into her life and played fast and loose with her love; who had said "You shall," and "You shall not."

So, after all, while he was in Canada, he had been comforting himself with a delusion. The happiness and repose of contented rectitude which he thought to have brought into her life had never come there. While he had been deploring his folly, she had been resenting it. If he had only come home; if he had even written—but he had left her without a word. And he saw with a flash now that the woman who doubts always ends by supposing herself deserted.

There it was now, all that lamentable past. She had chosen to let him know it; chosen to convince him of his folly from the security of her new happiness. Certainly she had defended him to de Cerjat; but de Cerjat was a man whom it was impossible not to contradict.

Still she had defended him; that was something. And what he had not done Fate or Providence had come in to accomplish. He thought of Frank's

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rough estimate of probabilities; he realised how full and brilliant her life would be; and he pictured himself toiling obscurely in Stonedale, and meeting her perhaps once a year to find the bond between them always a little weaker.

But that, after all, did not alter the fact that if she had struck him he had deserved it. Life seemed to him in his youthful enthusiasm, too small for amends. All he could do was to confess his humiliation and defeat, and that at least should be done.

So after many ponderings he sat down and wrote. :—

"DEAR MRS EYRTON—Thanks for your invitation. I will come. For the rest of what you say, I fully understand that things are not as they were. But as for forgetting, I have not forgotten, and I am not likely to forget. I learnt to remember in Canada when there was little else to do. For many months I repented of what I had been fool enough to think my virtue. Then there came what I thought was a chance to go back on it, and I came with the hope of finding things as they had been. I do not know whether I am glad or sorry that they are not.

"I have given so much moral counsel both to you and to your husband that you could hardly miss selecting me for godfather. But I hope I shall give no more. If the schoolmaster in me is ineradicable, I will tell my godson when he grows up never to meddle with other people's souls.

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"I hurt you bitterly once, and I am sorry, and shall be. But at least that is done with. You know the saying, '*En amour celui qui guérit le premier est toujours le mieux guéri*,' and I am,—Yours as always, GERALD NORTH."

Having despatched this letter Gerald felt an irresistible need of expressing some at least of his feelings. The only possible confidant was de Cerjat. He laughed harshly enough at the thought, but he wrote :—

"DEAR DE CERJAT—You are a prophet, and I fear I was rude to you. But it is an annoying and complicated world. We are the slaves of our actions. Once I sacrificed my inclinations to the heroic conception of my own personality, and now I find myself caught up and committed logically to a career of uncongenial virtue. The devil take virtue! I am going to be godfather.—Yours, GERALD NORTH."

De Cerjat read the note a day later, and laughed consumedly.

"He is very young," he said. "Still it is not a bad thing to be young. He will see the joke of it all soon enough."

THE END

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